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# Chongoene Airport A “white elephant” called Filipe Jacinto Nyusi



Maputo, June 2024

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# **Chongoene Airport a “white elephant” called Filipe Jacinto Nyusi**

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**“It’s our airport, where we only go to sleep” - PRM agent assigned to Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport in Chongoene, Gaza.**

**“It’s an operation that doesn’t make a profit (...) so we’re obliged to monitor this operation (...)” - MAHS, a company owned by LAM.**

**“Honestly, I cannot understand how we came to the conclusion that we needed that kind of infrastructure (...). It was a superfluous expense” - Alves Gomes, civil aviation specialist.**



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## Introduction

“The potential of the province leaves no doubt that this airport is viable” (AIM, 2021), these were the words with which, on November 29, 2021, the then Minister of Transport and Communications, Janfar Abdulai, guaranteed the viability of Chongoene Airport, in Gaza province. Abdulai was speaking at the inauguration of the airport named after the President of the Republic of Mozambique, Filipe Jacinto Nyusi<sup>1</sup>, who led the event. The inauguration of the airport was the culmination of work that began in October 2018, when Filipe Nyusi laid the foundation stone for its construction (Presidency, 2018). However, the implementation of this project, the first in Gaza province, has always been wrapped in doubts about its economic and financial viability. It is in this sense that this research was born, with the aim of assessing the degree of use of Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. It was particularly interested in assessing the flow of planes and passengers, taking into account the installed capacity. The research, which included fieldwork conducted in Gaza, led to the conclusion that, more than two years after its inauguration, the airport named after the President of the Republic has become an authentic “white elephant.” This is the main argument of this research, which shows that the construction of Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport was an ill-advised political decision that brought to Gaza what the province needs least to get off the list of one of the poorest in the country. The fieldwork confirmed that despite the fact that building an airport in Gaza was an electioneering agenda of the then Frelimo presidential candidate in the 2014 general election campaign, there is, at least for the time being, no demand to justify the implementation of infrastructure of this nature.

This work was produced using journalistic investigation techniques that included participant observation, disguising using a hidden camera, consultation of relevant documentation and interviews with various sources directly or indirectly linked to the subject. The fieldwork was conducted over two weeks between July and August 2023.

In addition to this Introduction (Section I), the paper presents, in Section II, the background to the construction of an aerodrome (not an airport) in Xai-Xai, showing how this is a long-standing need, especially to respond to emergencies in one of the provinces most affected by severe flooding.

In Section III, the research describes how, unlike the political discourse which, from the outset, considered Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport to be viable, the infrastructure is nothing more than a “white elephant”, to which only LAM flies, albeit irregularly, with unusual situations in which the Mozambican flag carrier goes to Chongoene to drop off or pick up a single passenger.

In Section IV, the research shows how, under current conditions, getting to or from Chongoene by plane takes much longer than using a car, to or from any part of the country, including Maputo, which is only 235 km away. In section V, the investigation reveals how, due to the lack of airport flow, the workers assigned to Chongoene airport are left to idle away their time, some days not even going to work. On site, the idleness is such that the workers spend most of their time chatting and on their cell phones.

In Section VI, the investigation describes another unusual case, in which ground handling for LAM flights departs from Maputo, in an operation that is more expensive than the revenue obtained from airline tickets, for example. Section VII presents another rare case in civil aviation, where there is not even a single cab at an airport. Likewise, all the services provided at a normal airport are missing.

Like the taxi drivers who have nothing to gain from the airport named after the President of the Republic, businesspeople do not benefit from the infrastructure either - this is the point addressed in part VIII of the work. In section IX, one of the socially sensitive topics in the history of Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport is addressed: the exhumation and transfer of bodies, a dossier that involves reports of mutilation of corpses. In the same section, it is shown how the compensation payments were unfair, leaving a whole community in revolt in Chongoene.

In section X, a Gaza-based activist, who closely followed all the stages of the airport’s construction, argues that the implementation of the infrastructure was a mistake, while classifying the case of exhumation and transfer of human bones as a criminal problem. Section XI shows how, in desperation, the Aeroportos de Moçambique company believes that the people of Gaza, particularly the miners working in South Africa, could be the ones to make the airport viable, through the use of air transportation. In the same section, the Fly Modern Ark (FMA)

perspective is presented, which, in addition to putting the miners in the equation for using the infrastructure, adds more variables to a plan to make the airport viable.

This point is continued in section XII, which describes a “charm operation” that began at the end of 2023, which saw some miners flown from South Africa to Chongoene, an action accompanied by a strong propaganda campaign in the media. In the next section (XIII), a civil aviation expert explains how Gaza province only needed an aerodrome, to deal with emergency situations, especially floods, rather than an airport. The paper ends in section XIV, blaming President Nyusi and his government for insisting on the infrastructure, which ended up becoming a “white elephant,” despite warnings that an airport in Gaza was unfeasible. Section XV presents recommendations on what can be done to minimize the burden that Filipe Jacinto Airport currently represents.

## Background

It was never CIP’s intention to argue that Gaza province should not have an airport infrastructure. Indeed, that is not the point of this work. What the research discusses is the relevance and viability of the “monster” that has been set up in the forests of Nhacutse, in the district of Chongoene. The establishment of airport infrastructure in and around Xai-Xai, the provincial capital, has, on the contrary, always been a long-standing need in Gaza province. With a provincial capital and some districts/cities located in low-lying, marshy areas and therefore prone to flooding, Gaza province has always lacked an airfield, especially to deal with emergency situations, particularly floods, which time and again leave the capital city, and even the entire province, cut off from the rest of the country, as well as leaving several districts incommunicado.

In fact, Xai-Xai, with a long history of aviation dating back to the colonial era, has always had an airfield, but it was located in the lower part of the city, making it vulnerable to flooding. After the colonial period, the need for an airfield in the upper part of Xai-Xai gained momentum following the floods of 1977. These were the first major floods in Gaza and the country after national independence in 1975 and were considered, like the floods in the Zambezi Valley the following year (1978), to be the biggest of the century (Comissão Interprovincial das Calamidades Naturais e Aldeias Comunas, apud Mandamule, 2024). Coelho (n.d.) considers the 1977 floods in Gaza to be the first “major floods” that took the state by surprise.

The 1977 floods showed that the existing airfield, belonging to the Aero Club of Xai-Xai, was not useful for emergency situations, as it became inoperable as soon as the waters of the Limpopo River overflowed. In turn, the floods of 2000, which also isolated the city of Xai-Xai and several other parts of Gaza province, led to a resumption of the debate about building an airstrip in the upper zone. This time, the Aero Clube de Moçambique even produced a complete project for the construction of the infrastructure, including the identification of an appropriate space.

In addition to the then heads of the Aero Club of Xai-Xai, this project was presented to the provincial government of Gaza, the company Aeroporto’s de Moçambique, the Civil Aviation Institute of Mozambique (IACM, the regulator of the civil aviation sector), the central government, then under President Joaquim Chissano, as well as successive ministers of Transport and Communication and Public Works. This project was also on the agenda of the Confederation of Economic Associations (CTA) in its consultations with the government.

At the time, the project was budgeted at half a million dollars, much less than the approximately USD 75 million invested in the construction of Chongoene Airport. The proposal included an aerodrome with the capacity to receive aircraft weighing between 15 and 20 thousand tons of cargo.

Aimed primarily at dealing with flood-related emergencies and serving to establish an air bridge to deliver humanitarian aid, such as food and medication, the project was also designed to receive small aircraft, especially with tourists. But the governments of presidents Joaquim Chissano and Armando Guebuza never got it off the ground, until Filipe Nyusi decided to build a “white elephant,” named after himself.

## On the “white elephant”

It is 1:50 p.m. on August 9, 2023. It is a Wednesday. Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport is empty. Completely empty. The four check-in counters (two for economy class, one for VIP/first class and one for special services) are all closed. There is no information on the respective panels about flight departures or arrivals. The conveyor belts in the departure and arrival lounges and the respective scanner machines are disconnected. All the seats in both the common lounge and the departure lounge are unoccupied. There is not a single passenger or airport service user.

In fact, the airport office itself is locked for the third day in a row, at least between 1pm and 3pm. Migration services are also closed. The small airport café is empty. The ten compartments for commercial services are empty. Not a single store is open. There is not a single security officer at the airport’s main entrance. The two police officers assigned to the site are chatting at the back of the building, on the inside.

The toilets, the corridors, the chairs... everything is clean - after all, no one uses them except the few workers who come here from time to time. In the restrooms, the lights are off. From outside the building, the runway is completely empty. There is not a single airplane. In fact, the runway at Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport is one of the safest places to walk because it is certain that no plane or helicopter will land. There are no aircraft roars in the air.

In fact, there is a deafening silence throughout the airport, which is only interrupted by conversations between police officers and the CIP investigation team. For the rest, it is the tap of shoes on the floor that echoes. This description, however fictitious it may seem, is the most accurate picture of another day at Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. The development looks like it is about to be inaugurated, but it has been like this for more than two years.

Budgeted at around USD 75 million, with Chinese funding (Caldeira, 2018 and Lusa, 2021), allegedly in the form of a donation through Exim Bank (Lusa, 2021), Filipe Jacinto Airport is one of the most modern in the Republic of Mozambique. It far surpasses the airports in the provincial capitals and is only on a par with the international airports in Maputo and Nacala. The development, located in the village of Nhacutse in the Chongoene district of Gaza, is a majestic work of architecture. Inside the building, the equipment is state-of-the-art.

Its total area, which includes the extension beyond the runway, is 1.4 million square meters (Presidency, 2018), the equivalent of 140 full-sized, 11-a-side soccer pitches. The runway is 1.8 km long (AIM, 2021 and DW, 2021). In terms of traffic, the development has the capacity to manage around 220,000 passengers a year (AIM, 2021 and DW, 2021). In addition to air navigation facilities - a control tower - the infrastructure includes a firefighting and rescue center, a power and water supply station, a cargo warehouse and a wastewater treatment center. It also has a parking garage for special vehicles and a parking lot (Carta de Moçambique, 2021) for dozens of vehicles. A tarmac road, about 1 km long, giving access to the airport, completes the range of infrastructures installed at Chongoene.

But it is all just underused potential. The reality is that Filipe Jacinto Nyusi is one of the least busy, if not the least busy airport in the country, only competing with Nacala International Airport, also a “white elephant” and one of the least used in all of Africa - Nacala airport has even been used as an events hall (Chissale, 2019 and DW, 2021). Until the first quarter of 2024, only Mozambique Airlines (LAM) made stopovers at Chongoene. Sometimes to drop off or pick up a single passenger. Just to give you an idea, from January to early December 2023, i.e., before a “charm operation” that led miners to use the airway to return to Gaza, Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport had received only thirty passengers, as an airport official admitted to *Tv Sucesso* (*Tv Sucesso*, apud *Integrity*, 2023).

Normally there are two stopovers a week. But there are weeks when LAM does not fly due to a lack of passengers to and from Chongoene. “How can you fly without passengers?” asked Theunis Crous, the CEO of Fly Modern Ark (FMA), the company that has been running LAM since April 2023. At random, in November 2023, CIP assessed the availability of flights on the only company that flies to Chongoene. In fact, after unsuccessful attempts to book online, one of the researchers, posing as a customer, contacted the company



asking to book a Maputo-Chongoene flight and vice versa for December 4 and 8, 2023. And the answer did not take long.

“LAM does not have a flight to Xai-Xai (Chongoene) for December 4th. We only have a flight on December 8th. That is why you cannot make the reservation,” replied an employee of the E-Commerce Department - VDI, in the company’s Commercial Department. Until the first half of December 2023, before the effort to bring in miners from South Africa, in a “campaign” with the right to “aggressive” advertising in the media, no international flights had taken place at Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. This is contrary the triumphalist announcements made by the government since the start of the project. In fact, the construction of this infrastructure, the first in Gaza province, has always been surrounded by doubts about its viability.

The airport is located around three and a half hours by road (235 km) from the city of Maputo, where the country’s largest airport is located. Moreover, the infrastructure is located in a province without enough demand to justify a large amount of airport traffic. Although Gaza is presented as a leading tourist destination, in reality the situation does not justify the establishment of an airport - an aerodrome would be enough to meet tourist demand - even more so an airport the size of the one built in Chongoene.

Data from the National Statistics Institute (INE), for example, indicates that in 2022, Gaza was only the third most popular region for foreign tourists (53,057), below Maputo (200,113) and Inhambane (106,109) (Redactor, 2023). In fact, at the inauguration of the airport bearing his name, on November 29, 2021, the President of the Republic, Filipe Nyusi, showed that in 2018, for example, Gaza province was visited by only 47,250 foreign tourists, mostly from South Africa, Zimbabwe and Europe (although the latter on a small scale), admitting that these figures showed the need for greater efforts to attract more visitors who could use the air route.

“With this data, the new airport will require more promotional actions to sell Gaza and Mozambique’s offer, in order to attract more tourists from Europe, the Americas and Asia, whose most used means of transport is the plane,” said Nyusi, urging managers at various levels to eliminate barriers to the tourism sector and not be afraid of competition to divert traffic from regional airports and neighboring countries (Tchambule, 2021: 4). In addition, Gaza is one of the poorest provinces in Mozambique, with no strong enough industrial park or business activity to generate much demand for air transport.

The authorities’ vision that it could be the people of Gaza who make the airport profitable, using air transport, is not only financially expensive (a round trip plane ticket cost, at least until August 2023, 24,930 meticaís, compared to around 1,000 meticaís for a return trip by car), but also more time-consuming than road transportation (because of the plane’s stopovers, leaving Maputo for Xai-Xai, for example, takes up to 10 hours by flight, compared to just 3 or 4 by car), is proving to be too ambitious.

As if that were not enough, the lack of frequent flights to and from Chongoene makes air travel even more unfeasible for a “normal” passenger who always calculates opportunity costs. With only two flights a week, for example, anyone who has an appointment in Xai-Xai on a Wednesday and wants to fly has only one choice: to jeopardize an entire working week. In fact, they can only go on the Monday flight. In addition to the long 24-hour wait on Tuesday, after fulfilling their schedule on Wednesday, they have to wait until Friday for their return flight.

“But this only applies to those in Maputo or Beira. Outside these two cities, you have to make more connections, either to the country’s capital or to the capital of Sofala. What is more, you have to be lucky enough to coincide with one of the weeks when LAM flies to Chongoene. If it is like the week of December 4, 2023, when the airline said it had no flights to Chongoene, the “normal” passenger, without a plane to fly to, will have no way of landing in Chongoene.

Another argument raised to justify the construction of Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport is that it is allegedly an alternative to Maputo International Airport, particularly on harsh weather days. The President of the Republic himself has already presented the infrastructure that would bear his name as an alternative to Maputo International Airport (Domingo, 2014), as did the then Minister of Transport and Communications, Janfar Abdulai, who pointed out that the infrastructure would be an alternative to the capital for some aircraft (AIM, 2021).

However, in addition to being a questioned argument in the sector, since the inauguration of the infrastructure more than two years ago, there is no record of it being an alternative to Maputo. In addition to the fact that its proximity to Maputo raises doubts about the extent to which, for example, on bad weather days, Chongoene will actually have such different navigability conditions than Maputo, the 1.8 km runway does not allow large flights to land, such as the Boeing class, which generally land on runways over 2 km long.

“On July 19, 2022, for example, the crew of the LAM Boeing 737 that left Nampula for Maputo, unable to land safely at the airport in the country’s capital due to poor visibility, opted for the ‘alternate airport’, in this case Beira International Airport (Carta de Moçambique, 2022). However, as Chiveve Airport also had its runway closed due to “intense fog,” the solution was to land at Chimoio Airport, in Manica (idem).

In the meantime, despite several reminders of the unfeasibility of building an airport in Chongoene, the Mozambican government preferred to defend the project vigorously from the outset. For example, at the groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of the infrastructure, on October 5, 2018, the President of the Republic considered that the project would promote the development of the local and regional economy, especially in the field of tourism, commerce and industrial parks, improving investment conditions in the province, as well as facilitating the movement of people and goods.

“It is in these terms that we took the decision to set up an airport here in Gaza, in the certainty that it will be decisive in increasing the speed of development of the province and our country as a whole. This airport should be one of the benchmarks in the southern region,” said Filipe Nyusi (Presidency, 2018). According to the President, the location of the airport was not random, but carefully thought out, in order to make the infrastructure more viable, noting that the region where it is located allows for quick connections to various places of socio-economic interest, including tourist sites in the province, the country and southern Africa. “But more than the economic dimension, this airport aims to respond to equity and social justice between the provinces of our country. To date, Gaza is the only province in the country without an airport. And we are for the sustainable and balanced development of Mozambique, and it is a way of decentralizing,” he said (Presidency, 2018).

Three years later, at the inauguration of the airport, Filipe Nyusi once again defended the viability of the infrastructure based on the tourist potential of Gaza province, highlighting the existence of beaches, lagoons, parks, reserves and wild farms, as well as historical sites that are part of the cultural heritage - especially dances, gastronomy and handicrafts, gastronomy and handicrafts - thus challenging managers to be “competitive and innovative in the offer of services, integrating packages that explore the full potential of the beach and sun experience, the contemplation of animals in the reserves and the exploration of the history of our country and Africa” (Tchambule, 2021: 4).

On the same occasion, the President said that “the sustainability of Gaza Airport will not be guaranteed by tourism alone” (AIM, 2021), even mentioning sectors such as agriculture and fishing as part of those that could make the infrastructure viable. “We did not build the airport just for tourism. That would be short-sighted. Gaza province also has resource potential in other sectors. Agriculture, fishing, industry and mineral resources, including major projects in the agricultural value chain in Limpopo, as a special economic zone,” said Nyusi (Tchambule, 2021:4).

Also, at the ceremony on November 29, 2021, the then Minister of Transport and Communications, Janfar Abdulai, guaranteed the viability of the project in the following terms: “the potential of the province leaves no doubt that this airport is viable” (AIM, 2021). But none of these promises have come true, at least not yet. In fact, not a single study is officially known to have determined the feasibility of building an airport in Chongoene.

What is known is that the construction of an airport in Gaza province was a personal promise of the then Frelimo presidential candidate in the 2014 general elections, when Filipe Nyusi was running for his first term (Domingo, 2014). Instead of a demand justifying the construction of this infrastructure, its birth was based on expectations of growth for a region which, in addition to tourist potential, had seen the birth of a millionaire mining investment in heavy sands.

In fact, at the time of the promise, during the 2014 election campaign, Filipe Nyusi said that Gaza had the

conditions to establish a free trade zone for its rapid economic growth (Domingo, 2014). The truth, however, is that more than two years after the inauguration of the infrastructure, all the predictions have been dashed, at least for the time being. And the bill for maintaining a “white elephant” falls on Aeroportos de Moçambique, a public company in serious monetary crisis, having accumulated losses of almost 820.5 million meticaïs in 2022 alone (Mutemba, 2023).



*Filipe Nyusi at the laying of the foundation stone for the construction of Chongoene Airport. The writing in the background refers to the project as a donation from the People's Republic of China.*

## When driving is faster than flying

At Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport there are, at most, only two flights a week. One on Mondays (Maputo-Beira-Chongoene-Maputo) and another on Fridays (Maputo-Chongoene-Beira-Maputo). All are from Mozambique Airlines (LAM), the national flag carrier which, in the midst of a serious financial crisis, is forced to fly to Chongoene, only in response to political decisions, in a clearly unsustainable operation, sometimes to board or disembark a single passenger, which may be unusual in the history of civil aviation.

One of the attendants on flights to and from Chongoene told CIP that there are cases of flights leaving Maputo for Beira without a single passenger destined for Chongoene, and that they have to go to Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport just to pick up a passenger. In other cases, he added, the plane leaves Maputo with a single passenger, goes to Beira and then has to make a stopover in Chongoene just to disembark one person, without taking anyone, due to a lack of passengers at Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport.

But that is not all at the airport with the presidential name. Getting to and from Chongoene by plane takes much longer than using a car, which can also be bizarre in aviation, which is sought after, among other reasons, for its speed. But in the case of Chongoene, this is not the case, and it is all due to the unfeasibility of Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. Because Gaza has no demand for air transport, LAM, as indicated above, does not operate direct flights to Chongoene.

On the contrary, the company makes stopovers in Chongoene, from one of its Maputo-Beira flights and vice versa, usually on a Bombardier Dash 8 - Q400. Taking off with a plane with a capacity of seventy-six passengers to drop off or pick up a passenger in Chongoene would be financial suicide for LAM. Stopovers are the flag

carrier's way of minimizing the costs of the "Chongoene operation."

In fact, anyone wishing to reach Gaza from Maputo, for example, a distance of about 20 minutes by flight, must first fly for about an hour and 20 minutes to Beira. At Beira International Airport, there is usually a stopover of between 30 minutes and an hour. Only then do you fly for about an hour to Chongoene. Taking into account the two hours set aside for check-in and the journey from home to the airport, the Maputo-Chongoene journey can take more than five hours, whereas by road, Maputo-Chongoene takes up to four hours.

There are cases where a passenger leaving Maputo in the morning for Xai-Xai, the provincial capital of Gaza, does not arrive until nightfall. During the production of this research, we had this experience twice, during which we experienced the unique situation of a longer journey by air than by land, when one of the reasons for opting for air transport is precisely its speed.

The first trip made by the CIP team from Maputo to Chongoene dates back to July 31, a Monday. At 9:50 a.m. that day, check-in opened. At 11:50, Captain Stefan takes off. Of the fifty or so passengers on board flight TM 1802, only three have Chongoene as their final destination. But none of the three are customers who travel by air on their own initiative. Two of them are CIP researchers investigating the "Chongoene operation." The third is an employee of the public company Aeroportos de Moçambique, which manages the "white elephant" of Chongoene.

With a cruising speed of 560 km, flying at an altitude of 23,000 feet, about 7,000 meters above sea level, the Maputo-Beira trip takes an hour and 20 minutes. It is 1:10 p.m. when the Bombardier Dash 8 - Q400 lands at Beira International Airport. The stopover lasts 35 minutes, until 1:45 p.m., when the flight to Chongoene begins. From the country's second largest city, the flight takes only two passengers to Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. Of these two, only one passenger uses the plane as her own choice to visit family in Xai-Xai.

The other passenger boarding in Beira is also an airport employee. At 2:10 p.m., Captain Stefan takes off again, now bound for Chongoene. An hour and five minutes later, the Canadian-made aircraft lands at Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport at 15:15 minutes. The plane, 32.6 meters long, 28.4 meters wide and 8.2 meters high, is much smaller than the 1.8 km runway can manage. At Chongoene airport, the plane takes just one passenger to Maputo. Without delay, it returns to the clouds, now bound for the country's capital.

The researchers stay in Chongoene to continue their investigation, this time with their feet on the ground. Once on the ground, at Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport, they begin to see the marks of what a "white elephant" is. Starting with the runway, which is brand new, announcing that it is one of the least used. When passengers arrive at the departure lounge, the attendants turn on the conveyor belt that receives the luggage and the machines for the non-intrusive scanner. But it is not the connection of these devices that draws attention.

What is striking is that an airport conveyor belt is only processing two suitcases (from the same number of passengers), since the other three passengers only have hand luggage. A few steps further on, two immigration workers are at the counter, but they have no work to do because none of the five passengers are foreigners. A few steps further on, between three and four officers from the Police of the Republic of Mozambique (PRM) crowd around a scanner to check the passengers' luggage.

Once all the post-landing steps have been completed, we arrive at the huge, shared area that serves as the arrival and departure point for passengers and their companions, but which is completely empty. From the runway to here, the situation confirms that we are looking at a dormant monster. As well as being luxurious, the infrastructure is clean. It is like an "island" in the midst of Mozambican airports and other public services characterized by filth. But far from having the best hygiene standards in the country, the airport is clean because it is hardly used.

Now that the only plane of the day has been lost in the clouds in the direction of Maputo, the only planes that can be seen at Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport are the four in an extensive photograph posted on one of the walls inside the building. The real runway is empty. Until Friday, August 4, when the Bombardier Dash 8 - Q400 makes its second and final weekly stopover.

In front of the building, outside, the car park is also empty. The only vehicles are those in the photograph, which stubbornly shows the optimistic scenario of what must have been the imagination of those who conceived the

airport, which is now nothing more than a “white elephant.” But getting to Chongoene airport is not everything. Once there, you have to start a new journey to the town of Xai-Xai, about 35 km away by road. But there is also a “however”: the airport has no cab service.

Anyone arriving for the first time and thinking of using a cab service, as is the case at any airport, has to wait at least half an hour while they call a vehicle from Xai-Xai. Otherwise, you have to take the “chapa,” as public passenger transport is commonly known in Mozambique. For this second option, less likely for the demands of a typical air transport user, the passenger has to walk just over a kilometer from the airport to National Road Number 102 (EN102), which connects Chongoene to Chibuto.

In the case of the CIP researchers, after leaving their homes in Maputo first thing in the morning, between 8am and 9am, they would only arrive in Xai-Xai at 6pm: 20 minutes. A vehicle that left Maputo at 8am arrived in Xai-Xai at 12pm. On Friday, August 4, the last flight of the week takes place in Chongoene. Between 10am and 11am, four employees from Mozambique Airport Handling Services (MAHS), the company that provides ground handling, arrived to assist the plane of the day. At around 12:15 p.m., two employees from Kudumba, the company that manages the scanners, arrived at Chongoene airport.

On their return to Maputo, the CIP investigation team witnessed yet another episode concerning the operation of Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. The investigators want to park the car at the airport but find it difficult to do so. It is not for lack of space, which is all empty, but because the airport’s own employees and management do not know how to proceed because, in almost two years, they have never had to park a car for a week. They do not even know how much the CIP team should pay. “It’s the first time this has happened,” confesses an embarrassed employee.

It is 12:25. The plane will land in Chongoene in about five minutes to take off again at around 1pm, but the departure lounge is empty. At around 12:30 p.m., the plane, which is coming from Maputo, returns to the long runway at Chongoene on its own. Only three passengers from the country’s capital got off. The attendant, who had been at check-in a short while before, rushed to welcome the three passengers from Maputo.

As soon as she leaves them in the arrivals hall, she runs again, now to the boarding hall, to lead the passengers to the plane. This time, the number rises from an average of five to seven passengers because the two CIP researchers are included. But the figure of five also includes one of the airport workers, who had arrived from Maputo the previous Monday.

One of the passengers on Friday’s flight was a Ministry official who went to Gaza with a colleague on a mission. To CIP, the civil servant confesses that she went by air only because she was on a mission. If it were a personal trip, she emphasizes, she would not have used the flight to Chongoene because it was, in her own words, “a hassle.” “This investment does not make sense. The time it takes from the airport to the city does not make sense. I understand that the airport should be outside the city, but this one is too far away,” she argues. As if that were not enough, she adds, the lack of basic services also discourages demand for the infrastructure.

At 1:10 pm, the plane takes off for Beira, where it lands about an hour later, at exactly 2:07 pm. Once on the ground in Beira, our team interviews the other Ministry official who flew with her colleague to Gaza. He tells us the story of the trip. “We were just two passengers: my colleague and I. It was the same route you (researchers) took. We came here (Beira, from Maputo), dropped off passengers, took passengers to Maputo, passed through there (Chongoene) and got off with just two people,” she says.

For the source, who doesn’t see any viability in Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport, “at least some aspects should be taken care of before an airport is imposed there”, lamenting, for example, that “the time it takes to get from the city (of Xai-Xai) to the airport is a lot”. Meanwhile, after an hour in Beira, the Bombardier starts its journey again, this time to Maputo, where it lands at 4:20 pm. In other words, the CIP team left Xai-Xai at around 10 am and only arrived in Maputo after 4 pm, more than the time it takes to drive from Gaza to the country’s capital.

The CIP team’s second trip to Chongoene was on August 7, a Monday. At around 11 am, our researchers went to one of the counters at Maputo International Airport to check in. The MAHS employee asked one of the researchers: “Are you going to work?” But instead of answering, the researcher replies: “Why do you ask?” And she replies: “I’m paying for a flight to go to Gaza anyway!” It is a critique of the “Chongoene operation” from the inside.

With a delay of an hour, the TM 1082, which should have set off at 11:50 am, did not take to the clouds until 12:05 pm. This time with Captain Fernando Bata. The Bombardier Dash 8 - Q400 lands in Beira at around 1:20 pm. At 14:10 minutes, it begins its journey to Chongoene, where it lands at 15:25. On the seventh, the conveyor belt at Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport is only turned on to receive a single suitcase, in the case of one of the CIP researchers. Once again, the airport is deserted.

The return to Maputo from Chongoene is on August 11, a Friday. Until 10:10 am, the CIP researchers were the only passengers at the airport. For the rest, there are PRM agents, officials from Migration, Airports and MAHS, as well as cleaners. On this day, the two CIP investigators are the only passengers that LAM has to take. In other words, if this investigation had not been underway, LAM would have landed in Chongoene just to drop off the two passengers from Maputo.

Until boarding time, at 12:20 p.m., in addition to the ten compartments intended for stores, which are all empty, the airport café is also unoccupied. Until, at 12.30 pm, the plane from Maputo lands. At 12:37 pm, another rare sight in aviation history: a cargo vehicle carrying the only suitcase of one of the CIP researchers. In other words, resources have been mobilized, from the vehicle to the fuel to the driver, all to transport a single suitcase that, strictly speaking, could be in the hands of the owner, were it not for the test that the research team is carrying out on the operation of Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport.

For the researchers, the only thing left to record is this unusual moment to show the price of poor political decisions that, in this case, ended in a “white elephant.” At 1:35 pm, the plane takes off for Beira, where it lands at 2 pm. There is a stopover of more than half an hour, until 2:50 pm, when the plane begins its journey to Maputo, where it lands at 4:15 pm. “It’s better to go by car than here,” comments one of the flight attendants to and from Chongoene.

## No Chinese flights

One theory that stands out whenever Chongoene Airport is mentioned, and which was the hypothesis of this research, is that the infrastructure was born to serve the coordination of the extractive industry in the neighboring district of Chibuto, where, since 2018, the mining company Dingsheng Minerals has been exploiting heavy sands. Dingsheng Minerals is a Chinese-owned company, the same country that allegedly financed the construction of Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport as a donation. However, the research found that the airport is not being used by the Chinese.

During the two weeks we were on the ground, there were no aircraft or passengers working for Dingsheng arriving at or departing from Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. From the interviews conducted on the ground, we also had no data to confirm this hypothesis. At the airport, a PRM agent, who said he had been working there for at least two months, said that in that time he had never seen any Chinese from the heavy sands of Chibuto or any other aircraft other than LAM. During the research, CIP went to the Dingsheng facilities in the Chibuto district to hear from the mining company, but the company did not receive the researchers.

However, while we cannot completely rule out the possibility that a Dingsheng worker has ever used, or will one day use, the airport, it should be noted that the Chinese workers are based in the company’s camp in Chibuto. Meanwhile, the majority of Mozambican workers are working class, including natives of Chibuto, who do not need to travel by air.

With the exception of some logistics that can be transported by air, the heavy sands themselves are not transported by plane, but by truck or ship - in fact, Dingsheng is investing in the construction of a dock on Chongoene beach, about 65 km east of its mines in Chibuto, in a controversial case involving environmental violations.

## Idle workers

With no flights or, at most, only one or two in the weeks that LAM flies, Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport is one of the jobs in the Mozambican public administration where the least amount of work is done, with the state footing the bill for this idleness. At this airport, the workers have established a rule, whether or not it was against the will of the company's central management. There are days when they simply do not work. At least until August 2023, when this research was being conducted on the ground, in the weeks with the two LAM flights, for example, the workers assigned to Chongoene Airport usually did not work on Wednesdays and Sundays.

The more than ten cleaning agents assigned there, belonging to a private company, Golden Clinning, had also adopted their own schedule. In the weeks with the two flights, they only went in large numbers on Mondays and Fridays, the days with the LAM stopovers. On the other days of the week, only a few were there to keep the "white elephant" bearing the President's name clean. The employees of the Migration Services also only went on flight days. The same happened with the workers from Kudumba, the company associated with the Frelimo party, which manages the non-intrusive scanners. The only worker in the airport café also had days when she did not set foot in the airport.

But on the days when workers from the different areas were on site, they also had their own working rules. By way of example, the normal working hours in force in the Mozambican civil service, from 7:30 am to 3:30 pm, were not applied at Chongoene Airport. Here, workers entered at 9 am and left at 2 pm. On August 2, 2023, for example, a Wednesday, a white Toyota Coaster belonging to Aeroportos de Moçambique picked up the workers assigned to Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport before 2 pm.

By 1:30 pm, it was already parked in front of the building, waiting for the last staff members to leave their posts. And so, before 2 pm, the majestic building was occupied only by PRM officers and the secretary at the reception desk. With the exception of the three of them, no one else was in the building apart from the two researchers. Of the two agents, one was on his cell phone. The airport director was also absent. According to the only employee present at the office, the director was in a meeting in Maputo. But since he was in Maputo, the person who was supposed to replace him, the director of the Aeronautical Operations Sector, was also absent. It was 3 pm when the official informed us that we were late, as the Mozambican civil service works until 3:30 pm.

In order to find the director's replacement, our research team decided to return the following day. But by 1 pm on Thursday, August 3rd, the replacement was not at the airport. The investigation team had to wait for him until 2:00 pm. When the team arrived on the scene at 1 pm, the airport was completely silent. There were only a few workers, apart from the PRM agents responsible for the security of the facility. But all of them were busy on their cell phone screens. In the parking lot, there was only one Mahindra belonging to the Provincial Migration Services, the Airport Coaster and two private cars.

There was not a single customer in the airport café. The eight tables (each with four chairs) were empty until, at around 1:10 pm, two airport employees arrived for lunch. But it was not that they had bought meals at the restaurant. In fact, during the two weeks we were on the ground, we did not see a single employee buy meals at Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. On the contrary, they brought them from their own homes. However, when lunchtime comes, they use the tables and chairs in the airport café.

The worker herself provided assistance to the workers who were using, free of charge, an establishment that exists to make a profit. Unusually, the workers did not even need to request the services. The worker did it herself. She already knew that she had to deliver plates for them to serve the food they brought in bowls. As well as food, the workers also brought their own juice and water from home. In other words, all they used from the mini restaurant was the space, chairs, tables, plates and cutlery, all free of charge. For the restaurant business, they do not take a single penny.

Our investigation team made a point of occupying one of the restaurant's tables. But the worker did not leave her seat to answer any customer requests. On the contrary, she remained focused on the small screen of her cell phone, where, in the absence of work, she spends most of her time.

At 2:55 pm on August 8, a Tuesday, the airport office was closed for the second day in a row and thus, the airport was empty for yet another day, except for the presence of PRM agents, who have an obligation to protect the “white elephant.” The idleness that characterizes Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport is mirrored in a statement by one of the PRM agents assigned to the site: “it’s our airport where we only go to sleep.”

Another PRM agent considered it contradictory to build a modern, luxurious airport with state-of-the-art equipment in a province with no basic infrastructure. The result of what he said was a poorly thought-out decision, he described as follows: “it’s always left in the dust.” Working at the airport, he is one of the people who feels the lack of basic services there. For example, every time he goes to or from the airport, he has to walk about 1 km to or from the main road, where he can finally find public transportation. He also has a classification for this: “this is hell!”

Because there is so much leisure time at the airport named after the President of the Republic, when the workers get tired of fiddling with their cell phones or chatting, some even play ball, as the CIP team caught them doing at 11:50 am on August 11, in the grounds of the facility.

## Assistance comes from Maputo and is more expensive than the income from airline tickets

Located in the woods of the town of Nhacutse and with no airport flow, Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport has no permanent staff to assist planes on the ground. In fact, every day that a LAM plane makes a stopover in Chongoene, the ground handling staff have to leave Maputo for the site, covering around 235 km. These are workers from MAHS, the service provider at Mozambique Airports, which, incidentally, is owned by LAM itself. So, on average, four employees travel from Maputo to Chongoene twice a week (on the weeks when LAM flies) to assist aircraft, passengers and cargo arriving or leaving Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport.

These include a check-in assistant; an apron officer (the one who shows the pilot where to park the plane); the so-called “operator” (the worker who chocks the plane) and load control (the aircraft’s load control agent, responsible for ensuring the safe and efficient loading of cargo, luggage and passengers onto the aircraft, maintaining the balance and weight distribution of the aircraft, ensuring compliance with safety standards and optimizing fuel efficiency). At Chongoene Airport, the tractor driver responsible for transporting cargo to and from the aircraft is an airports worker based in Gaza, so he does not need to come from MAHS in Maputo.

CIP’s accounts show that the weekly Maputo-Chongoene trip is much more expensive than the passenger fares to and/or from Chongoene, for example. The CIP investigation team identified the company from which the vehicles that transport MAHS workers from Maputo to Chongoene are rented. Cars of the class used by MAHS cost 17,510 meticaïcs per day, without a driver. But sometimes the vehicles transporting MAHS workers leave Maputo for Gaza with a driver from the company where they are rented. In the package with a driver included, the daily cost is 27,390 meticaïcs.

On four consecutive occasions (two a week, while this work was being conducted in Gaza), the MAHS workers traveled between Maputo and Chongoene and vice versa in a Toyota Fortuner, the latest generation 2.4 GD-6. On other occasions, the team also uses first-class vehicles, such as the Mazda Model BT 50. Taking as an example the least expensive situation in which MAHS workers drive themselves, that is, a package without a driver from the car rental company, for two trips a week (four days), the cost is 70,040 meticaïcs.

But this is not the only logistical cost incurred in servicing flights in Chongoene. The bill includes accommodation in Xai-Xai. In Gaza’s provincial capital, CIP also identified the hotel where MAHS workers stay. There, the cost per night ranges from 4,500 meticaïcs to 6,000, depending on the type of room. On average, four workers travel to Gaza per trip.

As the average MAHS team that goes to Gaza is made up of four technicians, and assuming that the company pays for the cheapest room, which may not be the case, housing the four workers costs 18,000 meticaïcs each day, totaling 36,000 meticaïcs per week. To attend the Monday flights, which arrive in Chongoene at around



3:30 p.m., the MAHS team usually leaves Maputo on the morning of the same day, but when they finish work at the end of the day, the workers spend the night in the town of Xai-Xai, heading to the country's capital the following morning, Tuesday.

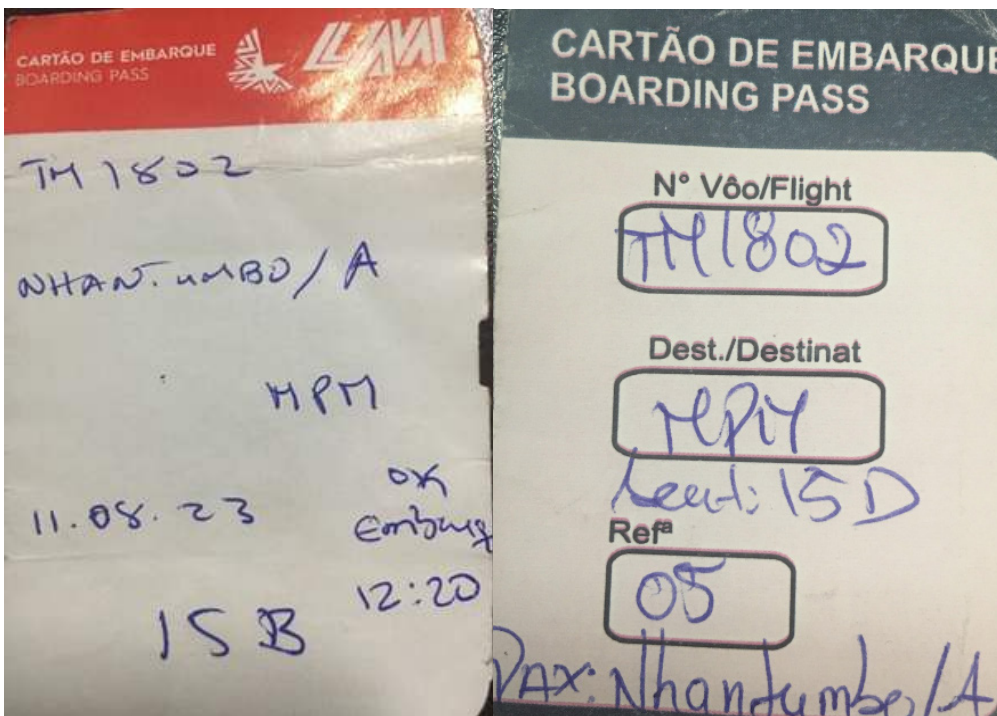
In the case of the Friday flights, which arrive in Xai-Xai at around 12:30 pm, the workers usually travel from Maputo to Gaza the previous day, Thursday, staying overnight in Xai-Xai. When they finish work on Friday, they head back to Maputo the same afternoon. On July 31st, for example, the team that attended the flight that made a stopover in Chongoene left Maputo at around 8am. By 12 noon, it was at Chongoene Airport. For the flight on August 11, the MAHS workers arrived in Gaza the previous day, the 10th, a Thursday.

These costs involved in the planning of traveling to Gaza, which do not include fuel, food, travel insurance and loss of workers, represent more than 50% of the cost of a Maputo-Chongoene air ticket on LAM. This means that, on the day that the company drops off at least one passenger and picks up another in Chongoene, 47,975 meticaais are spent on ground handling costs alone, in an operation that generates only 24,930 meticaais in revenue.

From an operational point of view, once at Chongoene Airport, MAHS workers conduct some operations manually because, although modern and with state-of-the-art equipment, not all services are automated. At

the four check-in counters, for example, the process is done manually. In fact, MAHS employees write information such as boarding times on the boarding passes with a pen. But because Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport is also not connected to the air traffic management system, MAHS assistants have no way of identifying, locally, the number and reference of the seat to be occupied by the passenger on the plane.

In these conditions, they have only two options: either call Maputo to ask for the number and reference of the vacant seats on the plane or wait for the landing to consult the on-board assistance team, to find an available seat. In the latter case, it is only in the departure lounge that the staff ask for passengers' tickets in order to fill their seats on the plane.



*With no computerized system, flight information on boarding passes is filled in by pen at Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport.*

At Chongoene Airport, there is also no use, for example, of the conveyor belt that is used to bring cargo into or out of the aircraft hold. “We don’t use it because sometimes the plane only comes with one suitcase,” one of the MAHS workers told us on the ground. In fact, another MAHS worker, who works in the cargo sector in Maputo, explained to CIP that cargo is rarely dispatched to Chongoene. She could not even remember the last time she had seen a “postage card,” as the stub stuck on the cargo with the reference of the respective holder, destined for Chongoene. At most, she said, it is one or two suitcases, which also confirms the low demand for flights to Chongoene.

Asked by CIP about the sustainability of the “Chongoene operation” in general, a MAHS worker assigned to assist LAM flights on the ground at Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport told us that this has also been the conversation among the MAHS teams when they go to Chongoene, precisely because they don’t understand the rationality of the measure. “They (MAHS management) know, but it costs a lot of money,” he said, pointing to the alternative of hiring a local team, based in Gaza.

## “It’s an operation that doesn’t make a profit” - MAHS

However, when asked by CIP about the economic rationality of the Chongoene “operation,” MAHS could not have been clearer. The company acknowledged the unsustainability of the operation, but blamed Mozambique Airlines. To CIP, the company in which LAM has a stake admitted that it had no financial gain from the “Chongoene operation.” “Economically, it’s an operation that doesn’t make MAHS any profit,” the company replied. MAHS even said that it is “obliged” to go into an operation that does not generate any revenue. “Since it [MAHS] is owned by LAM, which has social obligations, and which is owned by the state, we are obliged to accompany this operation,” the company said, adding that this operation ends up being a risk for workers who have to make the Maputo-Chongoene journey by land.

On the other hand, MAHS has made it known that all the costs of its workers going to Chongoene do not fall on it, but on Mozambique Airlines, as the owner of the operation. “The costs of transportation, accommodation and subsistence are charged to Mozambique Airlines. There is no financial contribution,” the company explained. In its letter to CIP, MAHS also confirmed one of the main findings of this work: flights to Chongoene only take place when there are passengers. “Ad-hoc operation,” MAHS calls it. “Because this is not a regular operation, it’s an ad-hoc operation so far, it depends on LAM’s request, and it can happen in a week or not,” the company said.



Ao  
**Centro de Integridade Pública - CIP**  
*Att: Exmo. Sr. Director Executivo*  
*Edson Cortês*

Rua Fernão Melo e Castro n. 124, Bairro da Sommerschild,  
Maputo

Ref. 041/DG/MAHS/2024

**Maputo, 21 de Março de 2024**

ASSUNTO: **R. Pedido de Informação**

A MAHS – *Mozambique Airport Handling Services, SA*, vem pela presente acusar recepção da vossa carta datada de 19/03/2024, com referência C.201/EC2024, na qual, V.Exias pede uma informação, ao que, somos de aproveitar o ensejo para esclarecer as questões conforme vossa solicitação:

1. Os custos de transporte, alojamento e ajudas de custo, são imputados às Linhas Aéreas de Moçambique – LAM, não há algum encaixe financeiro.
2. Porque esta operação não é regular, é uma operação até aqui *ad-hoc*, depende da solicitação da LAM, podendo acontecer numa semana ou não.
3. Para formar Agentes de Tráfego, é preciso cerca de dois meses, um pré estágio de três meses, após o qual, esses trabalhadores não são autónomos, devendo ser supervisionados por um a dois anos. A formação só poderia ocorrer em Maputo, o que teria que a MAHS incorrer despesas, com contratos promessa, ficariam depois a estagiar em Maputo. Manter um *staff* permanente para uma operação não regular, seria deveras onerosa para a MAHS.
4. Economicamente é uma operação que não dá lucros á MAHS, mas sendo esta participada pela LAM a qual tem obrigações sociais, que é participada pelo Estado, assim somos obrigados a acompanhar esta operação, embora reconhecendo que esta operação acaba sendo um risco para os trabalhadores pelo trajeto terrestre.

Em caso de necessidade, estamos disponíveis para um encontro para maiores esclarecimentos.

De V. Exas  
Atentamente  
Aurencio Guiuile  
(Director Geral)

MAHS 147/16/11/18

Rua Alameda do Aeroporto, largo da Deta n°113 • Tel.:258 21 465 148/68 • Fax.:258 21 465 173 • NUIT: 400091870 • Maputo - Moçambique

MAHS response to CIP



CENTRO DE INTEGRIDADE PÚBLICA  
Anticorrupção - Transparência - Integridade



À  
**Mozambique Airport Handling Services (MAHS)**

N.Ref.C.201/EC/2024

Assunto: **Pedido de informação**

Estimados,

O Centro de Integridade Pública (CIP), organização moçambicana da sociedade civil, estando a desenvolver uma pesquisa sobre o Aeroporto de Chongoene, solicita, com urgência de pelo menos uma semana, à Mozambique Airport Handling Services (MAHS), esclarecimentos sobre as seguintes questões:

1. O CIP sabe que as viaturas alugadas, em Maputo, pela MAHS (como os Mazda BT50 e os Fortuner 2.4 GD-6) para levarem os 4 trabalhadores da empresa que assistem aos voos da LAM, no Aeroporto de Chongoene, custam, na empresa onde são alugadas, entre 17.510 meticais por dia (sem motorista), a 27.390 meticais (com motorista). O CIP também sabe que o alojamento na instância onde se hospedam os trabalhadores da MAHS, em Xai-Xai, variam de 4.500 meticais até 6 mil meticais. O somatório destes custos, sem incluir os de combustível, alimentação e outros afins, está, claramente, acima do que paga o passageiro (às vezes, a LAM deixa ou leva um passageiro, em Chongoene), ou seja, 24.930 meticais. Qual é o encaixe financeiro que a MAHS faz por viagem a Chongoene e o que representa em relação aos custos da deslocação de seus técnicos de Maputo para Chongoene?
2. Qual é a racionalidade económica de a MAHS enviar pessoal de assistência em terra a partir de Maputo para assistir aos voos da LAM que aterram no Aeroporto Filipe Jacinto Nyusi?
3. Não seria viável a MAHS ter trabalhadores baseados em Xai-Xai para prestarem assistência ao Aeroporto de Chongoene?

Para esclarecimentos, queiram por favor contactar:

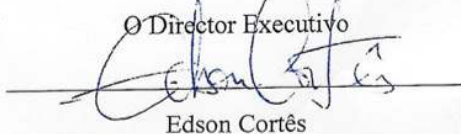
Armando Nhantumbo: 844851528

Raúl Massingue: 848019294

Atenciosamente

Maputo, 19 de Março de 2024

O Director Executivo

  
Edson Cortês



Rua Fernão Melo e Castro n.º 124, Bairro da Sommerschild  
Tel.: (+258) 21 499916 | Fax: (+258) 21 499917 | Cel.: (+258) 82 3016391  
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## An airport without taxis



Sebastião Mavengue is a taxi driver. He knows that an airport is usually one of the most profitable places for him to work. Even so, he does not go to Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. He has an explanation for this: “It doesn’t make sense,” he says, adding that “there’s no flow of flights there.” A taxi driver in Xai-Xai for over 10 years, Mavengue has even been to Chongoene Airport. But it was because a passenger called him. That was in December 2022.

Since then, he has never cared about Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. And he makes an analogy about why he never returned to the airport named after the President of the Republic: “Every fisher only goes to the river that has fish. It is not sustainable to stay at the airport waiting for someone. Even someone who sells tomatoes looks for movement. It cannot be in the open, where people do not come,”

says the operator.

For the taxi driver, it does not make sense to travel more than 30 km, spending resources that will not pay off. “I have to put bread on the table,” he recalls. In Mavengue’s view, the lack of direct and regular flights connecting Gaza to various Mozambican provinces and abroad is one of the main problems. Under the current conditions, anyone who wants to get to Gaza from Nampula, for example, has to fly to Beira and from there take and pay for another flight to Chongoene or go to Maputo and then drive to Gaza. The cab driver tells of cabs arriving in Xai-Xai, from Maputo, to drop off passengers who have landed at the airport in the country’s capital but are bound for Gaza.

Regarding the frequency of flights, he wonders, for example, which tourists will arrive in Gaza on Monday, the start of the working week, and return on Friday, just when the weekend begins, the ideal time for leisure. “If there were flights on Fridays and they returned on Sundays, tourists could come here for the weekend,” he suggests. For the source, an airport is valuable when it has passengers. Otherwise, it is worthless, he argues.

That is why he refutes in the strongest terms the argument that Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport was supposed to boost the development of Gaza province. “It is not bringing any development. That airport does not change anything. There is no change. It does not make itself felt,” he swears.

Sebastião Mavengue, interviewed 48 hours before defending his degree in Civil Engineering at a private university in Maputo, was the only taxi driver who agreed to speak openly about the “white elephant” called Filipe Jacinto Nyusi. Several other taxi drivers remained silent in a province where Frelimo, the party that has ruled the country since 1975, has historically exercised strong political control. However, one of the taxi drivers who declined to be interviewed reacted with questions that already revealed the feeling of an infrastructure that is not bringing benefits to the sector.

“Does that airport work? Does it work? Have you seen any planes landing?” he asked.

## Entrepreneurs without benefits

Businesspeople in Gaza also do not benefit from Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. Neto Ernesto Maússe, who spoke to CIP on behalf of the Gaza Business Council, is an outspoken Frelimo party activist, so he finds it difficult to “call a spade a spade.” While he strives to be “politically correct,” his disappointment with the project does not go unnoticed. “Tourists spend two hours at the airport, there is no coffee, no book. You only meet people who greet you,” he observes. Rather than blaming the government led by his party, he prefers to take the easy way out.

In fact, Neto blames the slowness of entrepreneurs to design services for the use of the airport and then invokes the need for openness on the part of the company that manages the infrastructure. “Our slowness is failing to respond to the airport’s challenges,” he says, without pointing out which challenges he is referring to, in a euphemism for calling the infrastructure unviable. “Entrepreneurs should design services and the airport should also make room for them,” he says, lamenting the fact that just to set up a service in the airport’s stores, 15,000 meticaís is charged.

The business representative in Gaza also cannot hide his embarrassment at the lack of regular flights and the stopover system at Chongoene. “I have to suffer, going to Maputo, but wanting to go to Beira,” he observes. What Neto Maússe says clearly, without beating about the bush, is that the Gaza business community was totally excluded from the construction phase of Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. “That’s what the state has failed to do,” he says, noting that the infrastructure was a proposal from Gaza’s entrepreneurs. “We wanted to have been involved in the construction. Even though it was a donation, the business community could have been part of the construction,” he says, insisting that ‘what is happening is that, at some point, we are forgotten.’

A renowned businessperson of Asian descent, based in Gaza, and also an outspoken member of Frelimo, assures that for the business class, the effect of the airport is not felt. He argues that the government needs to be more aggressive in attracting investment to make the infrastructure sustainable. “The airport is important, but it needs to be aggressive,” he says, without going into details, claiming that he does not want to “get into trouble with the party.”

## Exhumation of bodies: a sensitive file

Filipe Nyusi Airport is not only fraught with economic and financial problems. The infrastructure also poses serious social problems. In this sense, one of the most critical aspects generated by the implementation of the airport was the problematic way in which bodies and/or bones were exhumed and transferred from family cemeteries. The area where the airport was built was not necessarily residential. Historically, the site was depopulated when the communal villages were built during the Samora Machel era. In fact, the community was moved to the other side of EN 102, where the communal village was built. However, the people kept the graves of their loved ones there, while continuing to use the area for new funerals.

So, to make way for the construction of the airport that bears the name of the President of the Republic of Mozambique, graves had to be removed, undermining the morals of a community for whom graves are sacred. Instead of hiring specialized services, the government hired local residents to conduct such sensitive work requiring expertise. As a result, some bodies, especially those that were not yet completely decomposed, had to be folded up and forced into small coffins (residents call them caskets) produced locally, without any specialization.

Faced with a situation that violated the dignity of the dead and the morals of the living, some families preferred to improvise their own coffins, made from reeds, a native plant abundant in waterways such as lagoons and rivers. It is in these rudimentary objects that some families preferred to wrap the bodies of their loved ones, instead of folding them up to fit into small coffins. In Nhacutse, this is an extremely sensitive issue. For the entire population, talking about this case is to “remember the pain.”

Roda Mussá, 71, is one of the people who saw the bones of one of her loved ones being folded up to fit into the coffin. Mussá had two graves in Nhacutse: her son's, who died in 2000, and her husband's, who died in 2003. But it was the transfer of her husband's remains that caused her the most pain: they did not fit in the small coffins, and as Mussá could not afford it, she had to force the bones into the coffin.

"They bent the feet until they fit. I saw it with my own eyes. It was a deep pain," she recalls. For his part, Carlos Mahumane saw the graves where the remains of his two brothers, two grandfathers and an aunt were laid being dug up. In his case, it was his grandfather's remains that did not fit in the coffin, so the top lid would not close, "so we had to tie a capulana on top of the coffin because the coffin itself wouldn't close," he says. "That hurt me a lot and it still does today," he emphasizes.

Meanwhile, Feliciano Mahumane had seven graves on the site now occupied by the airport. To begin with, he says it was painful to see the bodies of his loved ones again. "Seeing someone who had been buried again is not easy. To this day, I am not at ease," he says. Two of the seven graves with his brothers' urns were recent, from 2017. "The bodies were still whole. They revived my sadness," he says.

According to the source, the bodies of his brothers also did not fit in what he calls a "box." As a result, one of the seven corpses had to be forced into one of the small coffins. "It was hard to watch," he says. Another body was spared because its coffin was still in minimal condition to be transported. Another of Feliciano Muhambe's cases was with the grave of his father, who died in 1971. According to him, the excavators did not find any of his late father's bones, because they did not dig deep enough and because it was late at night. "It hurt," he confesses.



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Meanwhile, Feliciano Mahumane had seven graves on the site now occupied by the airport. To begin with, he says it was painful to see the bodies of his loved ones again. "Seeing someone who had been buried being exhumed is not easy. To this day, I am not at ease," he says. Two of the seven graves with his brothers' urns were recent, from 2017. "The bodies were still whole. They revived my sadness," he says.

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Marcelina Massingue, 67, had a total of eight graves, where her children, husband, grandfather, sister-in-law and other loved ones rested. But of the eight, bones could only be found in six graves. "In the case of the three that weren't found, we just removed the sand and put it in the coffin," she says. With graves that have not been located in Nhacutse, it is believed that remains were left in the area where the airport is today.

Alzira Muchanga, 60, is also one of the people who saw the excavations come to nothing. Even after a deep grave, the remains of one of her relatives were not found. The only way out, she says, was to call in a shovel from the Chinese who were built the airport. But even the intervention of the machine only resulted in the

location of some of the bones. “Only a few bones were found,” he says. Muchanga also says that when people volunteered to make coffins out of reeds to wrap their loved ones in, they were met with barriers from those responsible for transporting the urns, who allegedly hindered the people’s attempt to give their loved ones the slightest dignity, saying that they couldn’t transport the bodies in straw because it would make the vehicle dirty. That is when the people also promised to wrap the bodies in clothes as a way of reinforcing the reeds.

The work of exhuming and transferring bodies was exhausting. It began in the early hours of the day and lasted well into the night, to the point where lanterns had to be used to keep the work going. Zefanias Tovela, 52, knows this story very well. He was one of the people involved in the exhumations. He confirms that the work was heavy. As he tells it, the teams were made up of two people to exhume each corpse. On average, he explains, a pair exhumed around eight bodies a day. He estimates that he worked for more than a month.



What Zefanias Tovela saw during the nights and days of exhuming bodies is still fresh in his mind. “I saw bones and teeth of the dead,” he recalls. He confirms that the coffins were small and, as such, several bodies did not fit. On the other hand, he confesses that he had no specialized knowledge and had never done work of this kind before. “I took the job because I was hungry. I did not know anything about it. It was a way of having bread,” he says, also confirming that he had dug deep graves without ever finding any remains.

For each body dug up, he says, the government has committed to paying only 150 meticaais per person. Even so, he notes, the government owed him 3,500 meticaais. “Our government gives money to itself. “We are forgotten,” he laments. According to Zefanias Tovela, the working conditions were also terrible. There were no helmets. The boots were tired. Protective masks were worn for two days, even with the sweat from the heavy work. The gloves were not suitable. There were no proper products for sanitizing them.

Zefanias Tovela also gives voice to one of the popular accounts collected in Nhacutse, according to which some people in the community involved in the exhumation and transfer of bodies later developed psychological disorders (in popular parlance, they went mad). The communities say that one of the residents who developed mental disorders is missing, having abandoned his home, wife and children. Another resident, who was also involved in the operation, lost his life, which, at community level, is being associated with the work conducted.

In a community where magical beliefs are deeply rooted, Tovela has no doubt that this is the price of the “anger” of the dead, whose eternal rest has been interrupted by the exhumation men. According to Tovela, the colleague who had been disturbed even referred to ghosts that had haunted him, asking him why he had exhumed them. “The ghosts told me to give them back,” he says.

Unlike some of his colleagues, Tovela has not lost his life or developed psychological disorders. But he complains of chest problems. When we interviewed him, he was just leaving the local health center, where he had gone to get on another supply of medicines. In fact, at one point the interview was interrupted by a deep cough. “It’s TB,” he says, smiling, as he tells us about the disease, he believes he contracted it while exhuming bodies: tuberculosis.

David Mathe, 46, also worked on the exhumations. Like Tovela, Mathe had no experience and joined what he calls the “project” only because he was hungry. He says the work was hard, and the 150 meticaais for each body was quite derisory. “There were graves where we went up to our necks and still found nothing,” he says, adding that in other cases, only small traces were found, such as clothing fabrics.

By her reckoning, the work lasted little more than a month, but the after-effects have not been erased by time. “It scared me. To this day I have not forgotten. “I have never seen that since I was born,” says Mathe, who regrets having taken on a job that, according to him, has also caused him ‘chest illnesses’.

The bodies and/or bones removed from Nhacutse to make way for Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport were transferred to a common cemetery. In the new cemetery, the treatment was the same, regardless of the conditions that existed in the family cemetery. Thus, the bodies and/or bones exhumed from graves that had been built with



conventional material were simply deposited in the graves, without new graves being erected, which also generated discontent in the community.

The population recalls that, at the start of the project, there was a promise that those who had improved graves in Nhacutse would, six months later, also have them improved in the new cemetery, which never materialized. Of the eight graves that Marcelino Massingue had, for example, two were made of conventional material, blocks, but in the new cemetery, the graves were covered with sand that was removed during the opening of the grave.

CIP went to Manganheto cemetery, where the remains removed to make way for the airport were transferred. Those who do not know the boundaries of the cemetery walk over the graves without realizing it, because everything is just opening and closing the grave, in some cases without even an elevation to identify the grave. Lidia Mandlate's grave is one of them. When Mandlate died in 2008, her grave was taken care of by her family. But in Manganheto, the place where her remains were deposited, you cannot even tell it is a grave. The terrain is flat and there is nothing to indicate that you are standing on top of a sacred site.

Carlos Mahumane is not dead, but he has seen two of his brothers' graves, two of his grandparents' and one of his aunt's being exhumed. But in Manganheto cemetery, the five graves of his loved ones are also not visible because Mahumane and his family were unable to build improved graves in their loved ones' new home. What they did manage to do was to place crosses on the flat ground, but even the crosses, which are so fragile, are already falling over.

According to the locals, each family whose grave was removed in Nhacutse received compensation of 11,000 meticaï, regardless of the number of graves, which the communities consider to be unfair.

## Compensation

The problem of compensation associated with the construction of Chongoene Airport is not limited to the graves. It extends to agricultural production areas, which had to give way to the construction of the infrastructure named after the President of the Republic. It is estimated that more than four hundred families farmed in the area that is now the airport. Various crops were grown there, such as manioc, peanuts, maize, beans and sweet potatoes.

Celeste Mondlane, 54, a widow, was born where Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport is today. However, when the infrastructure arrived, she no longer lived there. She had abandoned it in the days of the communal villages. But she still made machamba on the site. So, she was one of those affected. She lost what was her source of livelihood, for just seven thousand meticaï. But her case can be considered one of the least glaring, given that there were people who received only 4,500 meticaï.

As if that were not enough, the communities that lost farms had no alternative spaces for farming, which left them with no means of subsistence, further deteriorating their living conditions. There are even reports of famine: "They took everything and gave us nothing," says Celeste Mondlane. Mondlane recalls how, at the beginning of the project, there were promises of compensation. The lack of fulfillment of this promise has already led the residents of Nhacutse to riot on the EN102, blocking the road that connects Chongoene and Chibuto. But the government mobilized the police to repress the demonstrators.

For the local communities, Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport has been synonymous with misfortune since the construction phase, when they saw jobs, including for activities that did not require specialized qualifications, being taken by people from outside the area.

"This airport is of no use to us. Even our children have not had or have jobs here. They all come from far away," says Mondlane. Asked about the use of the infrastructure by the local population, she replied with a question: "How can we fly up if we don't even have any money?"

Deliciosa Whate also lives in Nhacutse. She also feels cheated. At the beginning of the project, she says, there

were promises of fair settlements, but in practice, she explains, it was something else. “We were deceived,” she says. “What we were promised is not what we were given,” she says. For Whate, the airport named after the President of the Republic is of no use to the population. “We have nothing to gain. All we get is the thrill of having an airport. Even our children do not work here. If they were given jobs at least in the cleaning area. But this is an airport that has only brought sadness into our lives,” she says.

The source goes further. He says that it is a shame that the residents of Nhacutse were not asked what they would prefer before the infrastructure was built, because they would certainly say what their priorities were, which in no way include airports. “We would choose a hospital, secondary school or even university because our children, when they finish 10th and 12th grade, travel long distances to continue studying. That is what is lacking here in Nhacutse,” he says.

In the area of health, Nhacutse even has a health center, but, according to Deliciosa Whate, it is not enough to meet demand, especially since patients from other villages come here. In education, she explained, the existing secondary school only teaches up to the 10th grade, so from the 11th grade onwards, parents and/or guardians have to pay for transportation for their children. In her case, Deliciosa Whate has to pay a total of forty meticaais a day for transportation to her son’s school, which is difficult for a person without a job and who has lost her way to the airport.

## Resettlement outside local standards

The site where the Chongoene Airport was installed encompassed three houses belonging to the same number of families. As a result, the three households had to be resettled, along with a fourth family, which was compensated for giving up its large space to build houses for all the resettled. The resettlement houses are located just outside the airport. They are houses of an acceptable quality. Each one has three bedrooms, a living room, kitchen and bathroom, utility room and veranda. Covered in sheet metal, they include a so-called “false ceiling.”

Not least, the houses have been equipped. In the master bedroom, there is a bed for couples. In the other two bedrooms, there are just as many beds, but smaller ones. The living room has a small four-seater plastic table and chairs, as well as a small single-burner electric stove. The respective fences have been built around the backyards, which also include gates (one for cars and the other for pedestrians). Both the houses and the fences and gates have been painted. It is all urban life. In fact, the light green of Nhacutse’s woodlands does not let anyone pass by without noticing the houses, which are the first attraction before arriving at the luxurious Chongoene Airport.

But the beautiful appearance of the houses contrasts with what you experience within their four walls. These luxurious houses do not meet local standards of living. From simple huts that shared space with fields, the communities have seen the resettlement radically change their way of life. From an almost primitive life, they have ascended to modernity, but without being able to afford the price of this “imposed development.” Unlike the houses they built using local materials, the conventional houses they were given have maintenance costs that the resettled people cannot afford.

The signs of this “development dilemma” are visible to the naked eye. Those who enter the houses for the first time are amazed by the precarious, reed-built constructions that have sprung up in the backyards, contradicting the appearance of “modernity” on the outside. There are bathrooms and kitchens meant to replace the conventional masonry houses, which require water to maintain. With no money to pay for the piped water that was connected to them, the resettled people preferred to carry over the “modus vivendi” from “before,” when, for example, instead of using flushing toilets based on septic tanks, they satisfied their physiological needs in latrines.

In turn, precariously built kitchens replace the internal ones in the improved houses. Not even small electric stoves are used. In fact, the few kilowatts that the resettled sometimes receive are barely enough for lighting.

As a result, they do as they did in the days of their palhotas: they use wood fuel to cook their food. The night brings another sign of the lack of money for electricity: darkness in houses connected to the national grid.

At 6 pm on August 8, 2023, for example, only one of the four houses had a light bulb on. The other three were dark: the owners had not managed to recharge their electricity meters. Only the road in front of them, which leads to the majestic Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport, was illuminated, using energy supplied by solar panels.

The lack of resources also affects the durability of the houses, as they receive no maintenance. As a result, most of the houses already suffer from water leaks on rainy days. Also due to lack of maintenance, at least one of the houses has become a haven for birds. The gates are also falling apart. CIP went house to house and found that the common denominator is the same.



Casimiro Macamo and Ana Mavila are old. They cannot say how old they are, but they can say that they used to live exactly where Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport is today. They are one of the four families who have been resettled in T3 houses. Vovós Macamo and Mavila are pleased with the improved houses they have received, but they still complain about the commercialization of their lives, since everything has to be paid for.

They are living proof of the poverty that has worsened since they gave up their land, which included their livelihoods, to build the airport. They lack everything except the hope of living. When we passed by, the water in the tap was gushing because their son, who came from South Africa, had just paid for the precious liquid to be reconnected.

“When they cut off the water, we do not shower. We just manage to cook,” explains Casimiro Macamo. To get around the water problem, the couple opted to build an outside bathroom and kitchen, using local materials. This is where the two elderly people wash and cook. As the interview is taking place, the yard where they live is beginning to be swallowed up by darkness. They have not been able to get electricity. The small electric stove they received is already rusting. They have never even used it and do not even know how to. They cook outside, using firewood.

With life “commercialized,” they remember the past that the airport took away. “We were people there. We did not lack anything. We had oranges, tangerines, avocados, coconuts, bananas, beans, chickens, goats and much more,” says Casimiro Macamo. According to the elderly couple, before they only had to leave the house and they were already in the field, but today they have to walk more than a kilometer, which is a complicated mission given their advanced age.

A neighbor of Macamo and Mavila, Laurinda Mbazina, is also old and does not know how old she is. Her story is the same. She had her water cut off for lack of money until a relative paid for it to be reconnected. She had no choice but to build a reed toilet outside the conventional house, which she says is expensive to maintain. She does not have the energy to light the house at night either. That is why the electric stove is not used either.

In the first person, Grandma Mbazina tells us that since she abandoned her previous, almost rudimentary way of life in favor of the modernity brought by the resettlement, her life has changed a lot. She regrets that today she does not even have a field, since the airport took his space. She is currently trying to grow some crops in his backyard, since the land he was loaned is far away, even more so for someone who has difficulty getting around due to his age.

José Cuna, 42, lives in one of the four resettlement houses. The house belonged to his grandfather, who has since passed away. Cuna is grateful for the improved house he received but says that it does not solve the problem of the lack of means of subsistence, such as fields and improvements, which were razed to the ground for the airport. Cuna confirms that using the allocated houses comes at an excessive cost, unlike the previous “modus operandi.” “We can have beautiful houses, but they have costs such as water and energy,” he says. The tap in the house where Cuna lives is rusting. With good reason: it has not had any water for months, he

explains, because “they cut off the debt.”

In fact, the interviewee only slept in the conventional house for two years. Afterwards, he tried to build a house with precarious materials, next to the conventional house. So, he sleeps in the reed house. He explains that the house he is offered needs to be cleaned, which depends on the availability of water. That is why he replaced the masonry house with a reed one, and instead of using the internal bathroom, he built two reed latrines in one corner of the yard.

Likewise, José Cuna built an outdoor kitchen using local materials. He also says that, when the houses were handed over, there were promises that tanks would be built to retain rainwater and thus prevent erosion. But nothing came of it. He therefore reiterates that having the conventional house was good but regrets the lack of conditions for its use. He also complains about the lack of jobs, saying that only people from outside Nhacutse work at the airport.

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## “It was a mistake”

Carlos Mhula is one of the few Gaza voices dissenting from the Frelimo party. He is familiar with the Chongoene Airport case, including the exhumation and transfer of corpses and human bones. As a human rights activist, Carlos Mhula has assisted families who were victims of the demolition of their loved ones’ graves and the expropriation of their land. To CIP, he began by saying that, for the people of Gaza, this is not Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport, but Nhacutse and/or Chongoene Airport. “This Filipe Jacinto Nyusi thing is political. It does not identify us,” he says, explaining that, locally, the infrastructure is more commonly referred to as Chongoene Airport.

For the activist, the construction of Chongoene Airport was a mistake, and he believes that there is no way the project will be viable. And he dismisses theory after theory. “Heavy sand can’t be transported by airplane,” he says. Regarding an airport flow from the heavy sands, he says that, by nature, the Chinese are not extravagant. On the contrary, he observes, instead of being wasteful, and being highly calculating, he cannot imagine them mobilizing planes for a journey that they can make by land more economically.

As if that were not enough, he adds, “the heavy sands of Chibuto are still a pregnant woman waiting to give birth. It is not like paying for school for 20 years just because you have ultrasound results.” According to the source, what the heavy sands of Chibuto need is a road that is up to the job, a port, docks, energy and other conditions to leverage and evacuate production. Regarding the theory that Chongoene Airport was created to enable a free development zone centered on ecotourism, starting from Banhine Park in Gaza, Gonarezhou in Zimbabwe and Kruguer in South Africa, which are strong tourist attractions that could allegedly have Chongoene as their gateway, Mhula believes that an aerodrome would be enough.

Regarding tourism, he says that although Gaza province is referred to as an important tourist destination in the country, in practical terms it does not have a flow of tourists that would justify an airport the size of Chongoene. “Is anyone really going to leave Berlin, Moscow or Paris to come to Gaza for tourism?” he asks, pointing out that, in practical terms, even the province of Inhambane surpasses Gaza in terms of tourist flow,

with more tourists coming to Vilankulo, Bazaruto or the beaches of Tofo and Barra.

When he looks at the location of Gaza's main tourist attractions, such as Bilene, located more than 100 km by road from Chongoene, the activist finds it even more unfeasible. He gives an example: "Can you imagine putting an airport in Zavala to go to Vilankulo?" Mhula goes further, saying that, due to the lack of use of the infrastructure, in some parts of the airport site the cane trees that were felled could sprout up again. He also comments on LAM's stopovers to drop someone off or pick them up in Chongoene, saying that this is a drain on a company in financial difficulties, all for political expediency. "Do you see a company like LAM, in bankruptcy, with a charge like that? It is just to hurt the bankrupt LAM, which is forced to land to take a passenger," he said.



In Carlos Mhula's view, what the country needs in the first place is a proper National Road Number 1, and not the current "national hole" called EN1. The source has no doubt that Chongoene Airport is a white elephant. "An elephant with no foundations has been created and my fear is that, as time goes by, there will not even be enough money to pay salaries. It is boarding fees, parking fees, etc. that give an airport its income," he says, stressing that with no planes landing at Chongoene, there will be no income. "Chongoene Airport is something that doesn't benefit us," he says.

Regarding the way in which the exhumations and transfer of bones were conducted in Chongoene, he considers the case to be a criminal problem. For Carlos Mhula, the Gaza Provincial Council and the Provincial Infrastructure Services simply did not understand that the idea of benefiting local communities by favoring local labor did not apply to work as sensitive as the exhumation and transfer of bodies and bones.

As a result, he denounces, those involved in the activity not only folded bodies, especially those that were not yet completely decomposed, but also, in the words of the source, had to dismember them to fit into the small coffins produced locally. "They butchered bodies in front of families to fit them into coffins. That was painful," he says. For Mhula, it was crucial to have allocated a psychologist to assist the victims of this "crime," at the risk of them developing psychological illnesses.

Regarding the loss of farms, Carlos Mhula says that the problem was compensation. He also talks about unfulfilled promises to hire local labor during the construction and operation of the airport.

## Authorities expect the population and miners to make the airport viable

Since August 2023, CIP has been looking to the competent authorities for feedback on the data reported in this study. The first time CIP did so was at Chongoene Airport, where it tried to speak with the director, Jacinto Mudaca. However, the answer we were given at the airport office was that the director was in Maputo. That is when CIP contacted Jacinto Mudaca directly by telephone. But the director said that he needed to communicate with the general management of Aeroportos de Moçambique and asked for the questions to be sent to him.

We sent the questions, but until the end of this study in April 2024, eight months later, there had not been another interview. What happened next was that the press office of Aeroportos de Moçambique contacted CIP, not to give an interview or answer our questions, but to negotiate a way of "controlling" the course of the research. In fact, since August, the company's press office has been "unable" to organize an interview about Chongoene Airport, while at the same time insisting that CIP do a "constructive" job, respecting the whole philosophy behind an enterprise which, they tried to convince us, never became profitable because it started operating in the midst of Covid-19.

With the insistence on interviewing the Mozambique Airports Board, the company's press office even appealed to the CIP, at the end of 2023, to forget the subject, allegedly because there were more pressing issues, in a clear allusion to the controversial local elections that marked the entire second half of last year.

Meanwhile, when asked by journalists in October 2023 about the profitability of Chongoene Airport, the Chair of the Board of Directors (PCA) of Aeroportos de Moçambique, Américo Muchanga, dismissed the claims of the infrastructure's unfeasibility. For the PCA of Aeroportos de Moçambique, a company in serious monetary crisis, Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport has only just begun to yield satisfactory results in terms of airport revenue, and the infrastructure is still growing, pointing out that it needs time to grow.

“Chongoene Airport is in its infancy. Any airport infrastructure that is placed on a large site has some time to grow,” said Américo Muchanga, quoted by the newspaper O País (Borges, 2023). The PCA of Airports, who was questioned on the sidelines of a public event in Maputo City, said that one of the strategies for making the infrastructure profitable was creating the conditions for the population of Gaza to use the infrastructure.

“We need to create conditions so that all the people who live in Gaza and who live in the vicinity of Chongoene Airport can use it as the place from which they catch their plane for their journeys” (idem). Additionally, Américo Muchanga said that the possibility of Mozambican miners working in South Africa returning home by plane using Chongoene Airport was under discussion. This is an equally problematic hypothesis, especially given that Mozambican miners based in South Africa traditionally return to the country at the end of the year with cargo that overcrowds their vehicles, with bundles that are clearly unfeasible to transport by plane.

## Looking for interesting parties

Less than a month after the statements by the CEO of Aeroportos de Moçambique, Journal Redactor reported that, in search of interested parties for Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport, a delegation from the company that owns that infrastructure would be working in Johannesburg, the economic capital of South Africa, over the weekend of November 18 and 19. “In the ‘city of gold’, the entourage from the Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport company has two meetings planned, the first this Saturday (November 18) with the leadership of the Association of Mozambican Workers in Mines and Farms of South Africa (ATMIFAS) and the second on Sunday (November 19) with the leaders of the Mozambican community in Johannesburg,” wrote the newspaper in its November 17 edition (Taimo, 2023).

According to the publication, the idea was to encourage the Mozambican community based in South Africa, in general, and the miners, in particular, to favor air travel when moving from the Rand to Mozambique and vice versa. “At the two meetings, Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport intends to convince the miners and the community of the advantages of using this infrastructure to make returning home more flexible, which has been chaotic during the festive season” (idem).

## “How to fly without passengers?” - director of Fly Modern Ark

Like Aeroportos de Moçambique, CIP also unsuccessfully contacted Linhas Aéreas de Moçambique to get a reaction from the national flag carrier on the weight of the “Chongoene operation” on its already loss-making accounts. The person who agreed to speak to CIP in November 2023 was the executive director of Fly Modern Ark (FMA), the company that has been managing LAM since April 2023.

Theunis Crous declined to share LAM's figures for the “Chongoene operation,” particularly the costs the company incurs and the revenue it achieves. However, the head of the FMA acknowledged at the time that the situation at Chongoene is not favorable, indicating that the airport has no flow. In fact, it was Theunis Crous who admitted that LAM even fails to fly to Chongoene due to a lack of passengers.

“How can you fly without passengers?” he asked, adding that “we fly if there are passengers.”

## FMA's plan

That is why FAM's CEO assured us that his company was doing everything it could to change the current scenario. According to Theunis Crous, studies were underway to introduce flights to Chongoene from South Africa by November 2023. In fact, for the businessperson, the viability of Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport cannot be seen from flights from Maputo, but from other countries, particularly in the region.

In this sense, he said that the work conducted by the FMA shows that there are a large number of potential clients in South Africa, including Mozambican tourists and miners from Gaza, who would use the air route to reach this southern province of Mozambique. Thus, he said, from December 15, FAM would introduce flights linking Lanseria Airport in South Africa and Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport in Gaza.

"People want to go to Xai-Xai, but there are no flights," he said, considering that tourists, for example, do not want to fly first to Maputo and only then to Xai-Xai, ending up driving from South Africa to Gaza. "The plan is to bring people not from Maputo, but from other places, like Cape Town," he said, noting that the FMA cannot solve everything in a day, but it will tackle the problems step by step. But Theunis Crous said that his company would be aggressive in its marketing to attract tourists and more potential clients to use Chongoene Airport.

In fact, Crous said he was completely opposed to criticism of the existence of Chongoene Airport, pointing out that the problem was the lack of a marketing campaign for the use of the infrastructure, and that this was one of his company's priorities. He gave an example, saying that when FMA started flights from Johannesburg Airport to the tourist cities of Inhambane and Vilankulo, there was also criticism of the business, but, as he tells it, from an initial flow of around 20 passengers, the business grew to around 70 passengers, noting that the planes started flying full.

In order to make Filipe Nyusi Airport viable, the executive director of FMA also considered the possibility of offering competitive prices, which would not be prohibitive, for air transport. He also said that, in the future, Chongoene Airport could be used for civil aviation training, as the FMA is considering setting up a civil aviation training school next to the site, which could serve the entire region. "It's part of our plan and there are discussions about it," said Crous, without mentioning any dates for this initiative, which he said would be completely private.

## "Operation Charm"

About a month after Theunis Crous's promises, Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport received, with pomp and circumstance, on December 22, 2023, what became known as the "first flight" of the new route, carrying, according to Aeroportos de Moçambique, a group of 120 Mozambican miners returning to their homeland to spend the Christmas and New Year's holidays. In a true "charm operation", based on Theunis Crous' promise for the FMA to be "aggressive" in its marketing to attract tourists and more potential customers to use Chongoene Airport, the Lanseria-Chongoene flight included several journalists, as well as several top Mozambican government officials, who went to South Africa to fly to Gaza from there to show off the operation.

Mateus Magala, the Minister of Transport and Communications, even functioned as a flight attendant, providing passengers with the usual information about the flight. In addition to Mateus Magala, the flight included the Minister of Employment and Social Security, Margarida Talapa, Mozambique's High Commissioner to South Africa, Maria Manuela Lucas, the Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism, Fredson Bacar, the CEO of Mozambique Airports, Américo Muchanga, the representative of LAM, Sérgio Matos, among other senior Mozambican government officials.

At the "white elephant" of Chongoene, there was a party on December 22, with singing and dancing by cultural groups and even by the miners themselves with state leaders. The governor of Gaza province, Margarida Chongo, and the management of Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport did the honors.

December 22, 2023, was the second time in more than two years that the airport named after the President of

the Republic came back to life, since its inauguration on November 29, 2021. In a promotional publication made on December 31, 2023, the Aeroportos de Moçambique company spoke of the introduction of a new air route, Lanseria - Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport in Chongoene/Xai-Xai, as “an important initiative by the Government of Mozambique to make life easier for Mozambican miners working in South Africa and to boost economic development in the region”.

According to the company, the new route allows miners to return to their homeland in just a few minutes, avoiding what it calls the martyrdom of hours or even days of travel by road. “This represents a significant gain for the miners who can now spend more time with their families and friends, maintain their cultural traditions and strengthen their intergenerational ties,” reads the publication. A video accompanying the promotional publication for Mozambique Airports on December 31, 2023, shows a fabulous image of Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport.

In the same video, the Minister of Transport and Communications declared, following the Lanseria-Chongoene flight, that “air transport is already human and mass transportation in Mozambique.” But, according to CIP, the operation with the miners took place between the end of December 2023, when they returned to Gaza for the Christmas and New Year’s holidays, and the first week of January 2024, when they returned to their jobs in South Africa.

It was not clear whether the miners paid LAM directly or whether it was withheld from the contracting entities. But in the marketing work on the route in South Africa by LAM and Aeroportos de Moçambique, some facilities were agreed to encourage the miners to join this initiative, from the definition of a special fare, doubling the luggage limit to 46 kg per passenger, as well as the agreement reached with KAWENA for it to ensure the transport of miners’ goods to their homes, recognizing this company’s track record in transporting and distributing miners’ goods (MTC, 2024).

A similar flow was only recorded again at Easter 2024, between late March and early April, when fifty miners were reported to have returned by air (RM, 2024). However, a delay in the Lanseria-Chongoene flight, which ended up making a stopover in Maputo, forcing passengers to arrive at Filipe Nyusi Airport the following day, angered the miners (RM, 2024).

One of the miners’ biggest concerns, once at Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport, is transportation to leave the site and/or get to their areas of origin (RM, 2024), at an airport without even a cab. As for the air flow itself, it is not just flights from South Africa that are scarce in Chongoene. Speaking to CIP on March 18, 2024, a local source said that the last time he had seen a flight at Chongoene was at the beginning of the previous month, February, due to an alleged lack of customers. “There have been no flights for weeks. There have been no flights for months. I have not seen a flight in a month or so. I have not seen a flight since the first week of February,” he said.

Meanwhile, of the approximately 23,000 Mozambican workers who work in South Africa’s mines and farms, most of whom come from Gaza, only around 4,000 have returned to the country via the Lanseria - Filipe Jacinto Nyusi air route, the Ministry of Transport and Communications reported on January 18, 2024 (Trape, 2023, and MTC, 2024).

## “It was a superfluous expense.”

Alves Gomes is a specialist in civil aviation. Between 1992 and 2010, he was president of the Aero Club of Mozambique. Between 1998 and 2012 he founded and chaired the Association of Air Operators of Mozambique (AMOPAR). In the same years (1998-2012) he was vice-president of the Confederation of Economic Associations (CTA) of Mozambique for Air Transport. As he has in-depth knowledge of the sector, CIP asked him for an independent reading on Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. But as was inevitable, Alves Gomes did not just talk about the airport named after the president. He went back in time to support the pertinence of building not an airport, but an aerodrome in Xai-Xai, thus coinciding with one of the central theses of this work.

Involved in the project to build an airstrip in the upper part of Xai-Xai after the floods of 2000, with priority



given to emergency situations, the expert has no doubt that the Gaza capital needed an airport infrastructure. To demonstrate this need, he recalls the drama caused by the floods that repeatedly killed, injured and isolated people in Gaza and Xai-Xai. “I was one of the first people to go to Xai-Xai when the city was still isolated [in the floods of 2000]. I went through and saw the fish inside the houses, I saw dogs hanging from the balconies barking out of hunger,” he says, noting that at the time ‘every seat was gold on the plane.’

Even so, he reiterates that it was not the airport that was set up in Chongoene which the city of Xai-Xai and the province of Gaza needed. For him, what the city really needed was a simple airfield. This, he reiterates, is more than necessary. “It’s crucial,” he says. He even agrees with the construction of an aerodrome with an 1800-meter runway, the same as the one at Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport. “This is important because it allows larger planes to land, but you don’t need to build [an airport] like the one in Chongoene,” he says. In his view, an aerodrome in Xai-Xai is necessary even to deal with emergency situations, especially floods. “This is the first priority,” he says.

To support the need for an aerodrome instead of an airport, Alves Gomes, for whom Chongoene Airport is a “white elephant,” uses the feasibility study conducted when the project to build an airstrip in the upper part of the provincial capital of Gaza was drawn up. And he begins by dismantling what is the biggest banner of the Mozambican authorities and their partners at Fly Modern Ark: the miners. “The miners’ market is false,” he says. And he argues: “When they say that ‘oh, the miners have flown from South Africa,’ it is true. But when did they fly? During the time of the [civil] war. From where to where? From Nelspruit to Xai-Xai. [By what means?] In a small aircraft, with six to eight seats. These were aircraft belonging to an air cab company, Sabinair, which later became Transairways.

“On the other hand”, the expert says, “LAM is not designed to serve a market of just a handful of people.” He continues that not even the six to eight-seater planes that transported miners from Nelspruit to Xai-Xai during the civil war were regular. On the contrary, they depended on passenger demand. “It flew when it was full,” he recalls. In many cases, the miners used air transport to come to emergency cases, such as deaths. “The miners only used it in emergencies, not to come on vacation,” he says. But even in emergencies, not all miners are willing to pay what they are saving, the source says.

The emergency situations they came to deal with, he continues, included handing out money to families, as today’s mobile wallet systems did not yet exist. “We did not have these m-pesa systems, and I do not know what else. But today we do,” he says. On the other hand, he emphasizes that, when he comes to the country, the miner takes everything he has managed to gather over months, or over the year, or even years. “The miner comes with all his belongings. That is not possible on the plane,” he says. That is why, when he hears about the plan by the executive director of the FMA, and now also acting general manager of LAM, to connect Lanseria and Chongoene on a regular basis, Alves Gomes simply says that Theunis Crous does not know what miners are. “I was in Nelspruit, and I saw the miners boarding and what they were doing here: bringing money. And it was that flight of six to eight people,” he says. “Forget the miners’ market!” he repeats.

He also says that tourism is a false argument. The beaches, touted as one of Gaza province’s main tourist attractions, are not as attractive as they are made out to be, he observes. “There are no attractive beaches on the coast near Xai-Xai!” he says, explaining that the best beaches in the Republic of Mozambique are in places like Ponta do Ouro, Inhambane, Nampula and Cabo Delgado. “People have to be realistic,” he points out. “Have you seen anglers in Chongoene? In Chindenguele? Boats? Because the sea conditions are not good. If you want to catch good fish, you go to Inhambane, you go to the Bazaruto archipelago, or you go to Massinga. You do not go to Xai-Xai to fish. Even if you go to Bilene to fish, then there is the problem of opening the canal,” he explains.

At one point, the expert mentions the alleged redundancy of Chongoene Airport in relation to Maputo Airport on harsh weather days to say that if Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport is not being used, it is not because there is no harsh weather in Maputo. “It’s because there aren’t any floods!” he says, stressing the importance of airport infrastructure, especially to deal with emergency situations. On the subject of redundancy, the expert asks: “Imagine a plane being diverted from Maputo to Xai-Xai with two hundred passengers, where are you going to put two hundred passengers in Xai-Xai? In which hotels? Where are the hotels?” He added: “These are the things that people have to understand, they can’t invent that we’re going to have tourism in Xai-Xai and that

someone is going to invest heavily by building hotels in Xai-Xai; they will not .”

For comparison’s sake, he gives the example of SunCity, a South African city that was built for tourism, with a substantial number of hotels, casinos and wildlife (including game), but where a simple airport was built, far incomparable to Xai-Xai. “It was just to bring in and dump tourists who came to spin in the casino and see animals,” he says, before returning to the case of Xai-Xai. “Nowadays, Xai-Xai involves investing millions to attract tourists - to build a bubble, but there is no bubble [that will emerge] in Xai-Xai!” he reiterates.

Tourism would be just one component to make an aerodrome viable in Xai-Xai and not a reason to justify the airport that has been set up. Still on the subject of tourism, he talks about the unattractive airport taxes charged by Mozambique Airports. “We’ve lost this market because of the airport taxes, which are very high!” he says, adding that this also scares tourists away. With regard to the heavy sands of Chibuto, which have also been called upon to explain the need for an airport in the region, the expert does not understand this reasoning either. Firstly, because of the nature of the cargo. “Heavy sands are for loading at the port!” he says.

As for the technicians, he says that a plane with around eight seats would be enough because there will not be 2,000 technicians flying to Xai-Xai. “All you need is an irregular but available air cab service that can take people from Maputo, Beira or Zimbabwe to Xai-Xai. But it is not one hundred people, or seventy, or fifty, its technicians,” he says. In fact, for Alves Gomes, Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport will never have 200,000 passengers, in reference to the capacity of around 220,000 passengers/year installed at Chongoene.

After all the arguments, Alves Gomes returns to where he started: “There is a need [for airport infrastructure in Xai-Xai], but it was not for this white elephant. There is a good reason, but we did not need to spend this money.” And, in this return to the starting point, it is the money spent on the construction of Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport that now needs to be justified. “Was it necessary to spend so much money to have this [Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport]?” asks the expert, who is quick to answer. “No!” he says assertively. “This money [spent], there is no justification for it,” he says.

He says it does not make sense, even though it is donated money. “You could say that it’s donated money, but it’s badly spent!” he argues, pointing out that, in addition to the construction of the “white elephant,” the infrastructure that has been built implies an excessive cost for its operation and maintenance. For Alves Gomes, the USD 75 million invested in Chongoene would have been enough to build several airfields to deal with floods and droughts in a province with road problems. “We could have built [an airfield in] Xai-Xai. We could have repaired [the airfield in] Chibuto. A decent airfield could have been built in Mapai or Chicualacuala. We could also have done the same in the Chókwe area and that would have really helped Gaza’s economy,” he says. And he gives examples: “It would serve entrepreneurs. It would serve institutions like the Railways, the Ministry of Health and even the Ministry of Education. And, during elections, it would be used to transport electoral material,” notes Gomes, for whom the money used to build Filipe Jacinto Nyusi airport would have been better spent if the overall interests of the province of Gaza had been considered.

Speaking of opportunity cost, the aviation specialist also does comparative analysis and the example that comes to mind is Gaborone International Airport in Botswana. “It cost 95 million dollars and is bigger and better [even] than Maputo International Airport,” he says. Once here, Alves Gomes has no other classification: “superfluous,” is how he describes the investment in the airport named after the President of the Republic. “It was a superfluous expense. Perfectly superfluous,” says Gomes, for whom ‘not even in the next 10 years will that airport be viable’.

In fact, despite all the government’s arguments, the expert simply does not understand the rationale that led to the construction of this gigantic infrastructure. “Honestly, I cannot understand how people came to the conclusion that there was a need for that kind of infrastructure in Xai-Xai. I cannot think what the arguments were because whatever they were, they all fall apart when you do the math,” he adds.

As one of those involved in the project to build an aerodrome in the upper part of Xai-Xai, to deal with emergencies, he explains that, with inflation, today we might be talking about an investment of around one and a half million dollars to build an aerodrome in the provincial capital of Gaza. In this regard, he even recalls that an area had already been identified, in the upper area of Xai-Xai, for the construction of the airfield. He also recalls how there had even been an offer to clear the area, since there had already been attempts to invade it by

the population. But, despite the offer, no importance was attached, which Gomes deeply regrets.

Gomes says that everyone from the provincial government of Gaza to the central government, including Mozambique Airports and IACM, is aware of the project. He points out that successive transport and communications ministers in the Chissano and Guebuza administrations were aware of the project. “We did not do it in secret. The Gaza government was aware of this project. The transport ministers were aware of this project. Woe betides anyone who says no in front of me!” he says.

He regrets that the project was neglected by previous presidents. He believes that Nyusi had the opportunity to correct this course, but decided to do what he calls “the wrong thing.” “It was not corrected. Now the damage has been done,” he says.

At the same time, Alves Gomes also regrets that the space, which was the only one available in the 2000s in the upper part of Xai-Xai has already been invaded by the population, even pointing to this as one of the reasons why the airport, also known as Xai-Xai Airport, is being built more than 30 km from the city.

## Conclusion

Located in the town of Nhacutse, in the district of Chongoene, Gaza, Filipe Jacinto Nyusi Airport has become, more than two years after its inauguration, a veritable “white elephant.” It lacks everything from flights and passengers to the basic services that make an airport a living place. The scenario is not surprising, since it was clear from the outset that there were no conditions or demands to justify the construction of an airport in Chongoene, even more so an infrastructure the size of the one that has been set up on the site.

In fact, President Nyusi’s government has always been aware of these warnings. However, instead of at least respecting the criticism, Filipe Nyusi, a President who is less open to criticism, has shown himself to be averse to these calls for attention from the beginning. On a visit to Gaza province in 2018, for example, the President took advantage of a popular rally to, as is his wont, send messages to those who were criticizing the prioritization of the construction of an airport in Gaza. “But why don’t they want us, with the little money we have, to develop Gaza? Why do they talk politics when we want to develop Gaza? That is their problem!” said Nyusi (Langa, 2018).

As he wrote in the Letter from Mozambique (2021), the head of state never took any notice of the critics who always considered Chongoene Airport to be unviable. Filipe Nyusi even said that the critics did not want to see Gaza province developed. This is why President Nyusi’s government must be held responsible for choosing to build an airport whose economic and financial viability has been in question from the outset. Even in the face of donations, it is unreasonable for leaders to prioritize or accept the construction of clearly unviable infrastructures, even more so for a province that still requires essential investments to meet the most basic day-to-day needs of the population.

One of the poorest provinces in the country, Gaza needs roads, health, education, water... among other essential conditions that have a direct impact on the lives of the population. The USD 75 million spent on building the airport could have been used to build several airfields and roads in a province with poor access routes, as well as to meet other vital needs for the province and the people of Gaza.

When a government ignores public criticism in order to build “white elephants,” even if this construction is the result of donations, we may be dealing with bad governance, because assessing opportunity costs when making decisions is also a matter of good governance.

Finally, the way in which the Mozambican government has dealt with compensation for the communities affected by the airport construction work, and the way in which the removal of graves to make way for the development has been conducted, show contempt and a total lack of sensitivity towards the affected communities, a situation that deserves condemnation in the strongest terms.

## Recommendations

The best recommendation ever made in relation to Chongoene Airport was the one the government ignored: not to build it because it was not viable, at least for the time being - but to build an airfield instead. However, once the infrastructure has been built and the costs incurred, it cannot be demanded that it be demolished.

For this reason, while blaming the government and particularly President Filipe Nyusi (after whom the airport is named) for the decision, CIP recommends:

### **The Government of the Republic of Mozambique**

- Mobilize partnerships that contribute to the use of Chongoene Airport.
- Create incentive measures for airlines to fly to Chongoene.
- Create incentive measures for the business sector to exploit the conditions offered by the airport.
- Conclude the compensation *dossier*, compensating communities fairly for the loss of their fields and the removal of their loved ones' graves.

### **Mozambique Airports**

- Design realistic marketing strategies to publicize Chongoene Airport and attract potential customers.

### **LAM/FMA**

- Introduce new connecting flights to Chongoene from various parts of the country and from the region.

### **The business sector.**

- Design and implement services to exploit the potential of Chongoene Airport

### **Tourists**

- Privilege Chongoene Airport as a gateway to the various tourist attractions in Gaza and beyond.

### **Civil society**

- Provide legal and even psychological support (in the case of the exhumation and transfer of graves) to the population affected by the construction work at Chongoene Airport, as a way of guaranteeing social justice.

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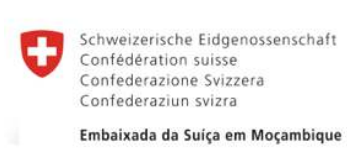
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Suécia  
Sverige



Reino dos Países Baixos

