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THE FUNCTIONALITIES OF POVERTY: WHY WHAT EVERYONE CLAIMS TO FIGHT PERSISTS IN MOZAMBIQUE

Yasser Arafat Dadá[1]

INTRODUCTION

Between 2000 and 2026, Mozambique produced a remarkable technical diagnosis of the causes of its poverty and of the measures required to reduce it. Over the same period, the poverty rate, measured by the national poverty line, rose, and the country came to be classified as the second-poorest in the world. The persistence of poverty in a context of consensual diagnosis constitutes a sociological problem that conventional explanations describe without fully explaining.

This Destaque Rural proposes a complementary explanation, based on the method of functional analysis, as formulated by Merton (1949)[2] and applied to the study of poverty by Gans (1972)[3]. The hypothesis is that poverty persists, in part, because it performs systemic functions for actors who are not poor and because the alternatives that would make poverty unnecessary impose costs on those same actors.

It should be stressed that "function" is used here in the technical Mertonian sense, not in the sense of a desirable benefit; that the analysis does not presuppose intentionality; and that its purpose is explanatory and critical, not legitimising.

Following Gans's procedure, the text concludes by examining functional alternatives and demonstrating that the reason for their non-adoption is distributive. It presents, as its central recommendation, the need to identify who bears the costs of each measure and to build the coalitions capable of imposing them.

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[1] Yasser Arafat Dadá, Economista e Mestre em Desenvolvimento e Cooperação Internacional pela Universidade de Lisboa. Doutor em Estudos de Desenvolvimento. Director e Pesquisador do OMR.

[2]Merton, R. K. (1949). Social Theory and Social Structure. New York: The Free Press.

[3]Gans, H. J. (1972). The positive functions of poverty. American Journal of Sociology, 78(2), 275-289. https://doi.org/10.1086/225324

1. THE ENIGMA OF PERSISTENCE

Mozambique does not suffer from a diagnostic deficit regarding its poverty. The Action Plans for the Reduction of Absolute Poverty of 2001 and 2006, Agenda 2025, the 2022 Strategic Plan for the Development of the Agrarian Sector, the National Development Strategy 2025-2044, and many others identify the same causes and propose the same solutions.

Over the same period, the poverty rate, measured by the national poverty line, which had fallen from 60% in 2002/03 to 48.4% in 2014/15, rose to 62.9% in 2022 (World Bank, 2026)[4]. The number of people living in poverty increased from around 13 million to more than 20 million, and gross national income per capita fell by around 8% between 2015 and 2024. Average maize productivity in family farming remained at around one tonne per hectare, far below that of neighbouring countries (IGM/UNU-WIDER, 2025)[5].

The conventional explanations are known and partly valid: exogenous shocks of great magnitude (undisclosed debts, cyclones Idai and Kenneth, the pandemic, the insurgency in Cabo Delgado), insufficient fiscal resources and limitations in administrative capacity. They are descriptively adequate and explanatorily incomplete: they do not explain why, among the available choices, those that preserved the existing configuration were systematically adopted, nor why the agrarian budget target has failed for 23 consecutive years, under different governments and conjunctures. The persistence of such a pattern suggests a structural mechanism, not successive accidents.

1.1. Merton's question

In 1949, Merton confronted the following enigma: the persistence of party machines in the United States, universally denounced as corrupt and harmful, which nonetheless reproduced themselves with stability. His answer was that, if a social structure persists despite being condemned, it is because it performs functions that the alternatives do not perform. In 1972, Gans applied this procedure to poverty and identified 15 functions that poverty performs for the non-poor, grouped into four categories, including ensuring that dirty or dangerous work is done, subsidising, through low wages, activities that benefit the better-off, and making the poor absorb the costs of growth.

[4]World Bank. (2026). Mozambique - Country Overview. World Bank. https://www.worldbank.org/pt/country/mozambique/overview

[5]IGM / UNU-WIDER. (2025). Agricultural development in Mozambique 2002-2020. Helsinki: UNU-WIDER. https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/Publications/Report/PDF/IGM-report-agicultural-sector-2025-por.pdf

The decisive element, which this text returns to in the final section, is not the functions themselves; it is the non-adopted alternatives. For each identified function there are alternatives capable of making poverty unnecessary; but the most important of these are themselves dysfunctional for the non-poor "since they require some redistribution of income and power" (Gans, 1972). This is where the explanatory power of the approach lies: persistence is not explained by the absence of solutions, but by the requirement to distribute their costs.

1.2. What this text does not claim

It is important to delimit the scope of the argument. It does not claim that there are actors who deliberately maintain poverty: the analysis is conducted at the level of systemic consequences. It does not claim that poverty is globally advantageous: the costs - lost human capital, unrealised productivity and social instability - exceed any sectoral benefits. Nor does it suggest that decision-makers are indifferent to poverty, or that poverty is functional for the poor, which would invert the argument.

It claims that certain arrangements produce, for identifiable actors, benefits that depend on poverty, and that changing those arrangements would impose additional costs on those who benefit from them, while the gains would be distributed among those who lack the capacity to demand them.

2. SEVEN FUNCTIONALITIES OF POVERTY IN MOZAMBIQUE

2.1. The reproduction of labour power at zero cost

The first functionality has, in the context of Southern Africa, a classic theoretical formulation. Wolpe (1972)[6] showed that the twentieth-century South African economic system articulated a capitalist mining economy with peasant subsistence economies: the latter ensured the reproduction of labour power, while the migrant's wage covered only his individual subsistence, below the cost of family reproduction. Meillassoux (1975)[7] developed a convergent formulation on the articulation between domestic and capitalist modes of production.

[6] Wolpe, H. (1972). Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid. Economy and Society, 1(4), 425-456. https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147200000023

[7] Meillassoux, C. (1975). Femmes, greniers et capitaux. Paris: Francois Maspero. [English ed.: Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community. Cambridge University Press, 1981.]

The migrant labour system for the South African mines, analysed by Ruth First (1983)[8] and Patrick Harries (1994)[9], organised the importation of Mozambican labour: the migrant was a proletarian in the mine and a peasant at origin, and the family machamba, cultivated mainly by women, subsidised the wage cost of mining capital.

This configuration has intensified. The current agricultural minimum wage is 6,688 meticais per month, the lowest among the formal sectors and insufficient to cover the cost of an adequate diet for a household[10]. Family farming sustains around 85% of households without generating significant monetary income. The systemic function is the one identified by Wolpe: wages in the formal sector and prices paid to producers remain below the cost of family reproduction because the difference is borne through domestic self-exploitation. The rural economy subsidises the formal economy.

2.2. Informality as a shock absorber

The second functionality is political: around 500,000 young people enter the labour market every year and around 30,000 formal jobs are created annually (World Bank, 2026). The remaining 470,000 young people are absorbed by subsistence agriculture, informal trade, semi-collective transport and occasional work: in 2025, around 75% of young people remained in informal or precarious employment (MPD/IGC/LSE/Oxford, 2026)[11].

The reading is as follows. A system that does not absorb these 470,000 young people produces mass open unemployment. Informality performs the function of a shock absorber: it converts politically visible unemployment into economically invisible underemployment. The young man riding a rented motorbike in Pemba does not appear in unemployment statistics.

This explains an anomaly: the informal sector is the object of ambivalent discourse (recognised as a problem but tolerated as a solution); a development deficit accepted as a mechanism of social containment.

[8] First, R. (1983). Black Gold: The Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant. Brighton: Harvester Press.

[9] Harries, P. (1994). Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860-1910. Portsmouth: Heinemann

[10] Dada, Y. (2026). The 100 meticais and the Mozambican rural woman: eating to avoid dying of hunger or eating for adequate nutrition. Destaque Rural 386. OMR. https://omrmz.org/destaque_rural/os-100-meticais-e-a-mulher-rural-mocambicana-comer-para-nao-morrer-de-fome-ou-comer-para-ter-nutricao-adequada/

[11] MPD / IGC / LSE / Oxford. (2026). Assessment Report on the Results of Agenda 2025 in Mozambique: progress, constraints and lessons for post-2025 development. Maputo: Ministry of Planning and Development.

To this political function is added a fiscal consequence that reinforces the enduring configuration. A labour market in which more than 80% of employment is informal produces a narrow tax base: revenue depends on a small core of large taxpayers and on indirect taxation of consumption. A State financed in this way has little incentive to negotiate with informal workers the classic social contract: the citizen agrees to be taxed and, in return, demands accountability for how revenue is spent and public services that justify it. Those who work informally do not pay personal income tax, nor do they contribute to social security and, therefore, do not acquire the status of taxpayers with legitimacy to demand accountability from the State. Informality therefore absorbs pressure twice over: it contains social pressure and, because it does not generate recognised or organised taxpayers, it does not create the channel through which that pressure can be converted into an audible demand. This does not claim that the political system responds only to taxpayers, but that a State whose revenue base is restricted to a small core of taxpayers has little incentive to respond to those who do not "weigh" in revenue[12].

2.3. Poverty as an organisational resource

The third functionality identified by Gans is the creation of employment in occupations that serve the poor. In a study in Lesotho, Ferguson (1994)[13] showed that an internationally financed rural development project failed in its declared objectives (it did not increase production or household income) but produced two undeclared effects: the expansion of the bureaucratic presence of the State and the depoliticisation of poverty, which was converted from a distributive problem into a technical problem.

The applicability to Mozambique is found in the literature on aid dependence. Moss, Pettersson and van de Walle (2006)[14] formulated the aid-institutions paradox: where aid finances a substantial share of public expenditure over prolonged periods, accountability is oriented towards funders and not towards citizens. For Mozambique, de Renzio and Hanlon (2007)[15] documented these dilemmas, and Hanlon and Smart (2008)[16] analysed how the aid architecture conditioned national choices.

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[12] Prichard, W. (2015). Taxation, Responsiveness and Accountability in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Dynamics of Tax Bargaining. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[13] Ferguson, J. (1994). The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[14] Moss, T., Pettersson, G., & van de Walle, N. (2006). An aid-institutions paradox? A review essay on aid dependency and state building in sub-Saharan Africa. Center for Global Development Working Paper 74. https://www.cgdev.org/publication/aid-institutions-paradox-review-essay-aid-dependency-and-state-building-sub-saharan

[15] de Renzio, P., & Hanlon, J. (2007). Contested sovereignty in Mozambique: the dilemmas of aid dependence. GEG Working Paper 2007/25. Oxford: Global Economic Governance Programme. https://www.geg.ox.ac.uk/publication/geg-wp-200725-contested-sovereignty-mozambique-dilemmas-aid-dependence

[16] Hanlon, J., & Smart, T. (2008). Do Bicycles Equal Development in Mozambique? Woodbridge: James Currey.

The functionality that follows is that, in Mozambique, there is a set of organisations (international agencies, non-governmental organisations, project implementation units, consulting firms) whose existence, skilled employment and mandate depend on the persistence of the problem they declare themselves to be fighting, a problem whose reduction would make part of this apparatus unnecessary. This does not imply that they produce no benefits; it implies that the system has no mechanism to penalise the persistence of the problem and that, at the same time, it drains qualified staff from the public administration into project salaries, undermining the very State capacity that the projects claim to strengthen.

2.4. Dependence, clientelism and the asymmetry of collective action

The fourth functionality appears in Mancur Olson's (1965)[17] analysis of the logic of collective action, which demonstrated that small groups with concentrated interests prevail politically over large groups with diffuse interests, even when the aggregate benefit of the latter is far greater. The system deepens the asymmetry through three mechanisms: it reduces the resource surplus available to finance collective action; it shortens the decision horizon, as the urgency of subsistence prioritises the immediate benefit accessible within the existing system over future gains; and it raises the relative cost of the risk associated with contestation, a risk that, for those living near subsistence minimum, represents a much larger fraction of total income.

The systemic consequence is that the potential beneficiaries of reform (family farmers, young people without formal employment, rural women and informal workers) constitute the paradigmatic case of Olson's latent group: numerous, dispersed, unorganised and without access to decision-making. When transport operators paralysed Maputo and Matola in May 2026, the Government announced subsidies; but decades of stagnant agricultural productivity have never produced a comparable emergency response. The difference is not exhausted by organisational capacity: the urban visibility of the blockade, its concentration in the capital and the risk to public order impose an immediate political cost that diffuse and gradual agricultural stagnation does not produce.

The literature on electoral clientelism (Stokes et al., 2013)[18] establishes that the effectiveness of the discretionary distribution of goods is inversely proportional to voters' income; that is, the same good has a higher perceived value for a poor voter and has greater political effect in poor areas. It follows that poverty increases the political return of

[17] Olson, M. (1965). The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[18] Stokes, S. C., Dunning, T., Nazareno, M., & Brusco, V. (2013). Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107324909

clientelistic distribution and reduces the return of the universal provision of rights. A poor citizen is a grateful beneficiary; a citizen with sufficient income is a demanding taxpayer.

2.5. Women as the last resort

The fifth functionality is reformulated here functionally. When the State does not provide piped water, it is the woman who walks the distance to the source: in rural areas, 80% of the population collects water outside the home; in more than 90% of households, it is women and girls who collect water. When income is insufficient, it is the woman who manages scarcity, as documented in the literature on intra-household allocation (Harris-Fry et al., 2017)[19]. Without childcare or accessible health care, it is the woman who cares for the family. The ILO estimates that women perform 76.2% of unpaid care work (ILO, 2018)[20].

The functional reading is as follows: women's unpaid labour is the mechanism through which the failures of the State and the market are absorbed without producing rupture. It is because the woman cooks with "one hundred meticais" that the insufficiency of the minimum wage does not translate into hunger. And because care work does not enter gross domestic product, the saving the State makes by not providing the service does not appear as a transferred cost: it is an invisible subsidy provided by poor women to the public budget.

2.6. The territorial absorption of the costs of development

The sixth functionality corresponds to one of the functions identified by Gans: making the poor absorb the costs of change and growth. In the Mozambican case, this function is territorial and is documented in the areas of large extractive projects. Populations displaced to make extraction, transport and processing infrastructures viable lose access to agricultural land, fishing grounds and forest resources (assets whose value typically exceeds that of the improvements that usually form the basis of compensation).

The functionality lies in the asymmetry of capacity for resistance. A peasant family without an individual land title, without legal representation and without formal political organisation presents a much lower displacement cost than an urban population with titled property and litigation capacity: analytically, the poverty of the affected population reduces the cost of the project. This does not imply deliberate exploitation, but that the

[19] Harris-Fry, H., Shrestha, N., Costello, A., & Saville, N. M. (2017). Determinants of intra-household food allocation between adults in South Asia: a systematic review. International Journal for Equity in Health, 16, 107. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-017-0603-1

[20] ILO: International Labour Organization / Addati, L., Cattaneo, U., Esquivel, V., & Valarino, I. (2018). Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work. Geneva: International Labour Office. https://www.ilo.org/publications/care-work-and-care-jobs-future-decent-work

structure of incentives favours the location of environmental and social costs in territories with lower resistance.

The legal framework helps explain why the asymmetry reproduces itself. In Mozambique, land is State property and the right of use and benefit acquired through occupation is legally recognised, including when it is not titled. In administrative practice, however, compensation tends to focus on visible improvements and crops, rather than on the capitalised value of lost access to land, water and common resources. The right exists; what is lacking is the capacity to convert it into a price. It is this distance between formal entitlement and effective enforceability that reduces the cost of the project[21].

2.7. The romanticisation of resilience

The seventh functionality is discursive. The public celebration of the capacity of the poor to "do much with little" performs a legitimising function identified by critical literature. Béné et al. (2012)[22] warn that resilience, when converted into a policy objective, operates as a "new tyranny", shifting attention from structural causes to the adaptive capacity of the vulnerable. MacKinnon and Derickson (2013)[23] argue that it is conservative in its political effect: it makes shocks "normal" and absolves those who produce them of responsibility. Evans and Reid (2014)[24] argue that the resilient subject is asked to accept danger as permanent and adapt to it, instead of demanding that the causes of danger be eliminated: it is the opposite of the subject of rights, who claims protection and redress in the name of rights that are due.

The functionality is double: it converts institutional failure into individual virtue and shifts the political question (why is income insufficient?) into a question of household management. As long as the second occupies public space, the first is not formulated.

[21] Law No. 19/97, of 1 October (Land Law). Boletim da Republica, Series I, No. 40. Maputo: National Printing Office of Mozambique.

[22] Bene, C., Godfrey Wood, R., Newsham, A., & Davies, M. (2012). Resilience: New utopia or new tyranny? Reflection about the potentials and limits of the concept of resilience in relation to vulnerability reduction programmes. IDS Working Paper 405. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2040-0209.2012.00405.x

[23] MacKinnon, D., & Derickson, K. D. (2013). From resilience to resourcefulness: A critique of resilience policy and activism. Progress in Human Geography, 37(2), 253-270. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512454775

[24] Evans, B., & Reid, J. (2014). Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Table 1: Functionalities of poverty in Mozambique

Functionality	Mechanism	Who benefits	Evidence mobilised
Reproduction at zero cost	Subsistence agriculture sustains families, allowing wages below the cost of reproduction	Formal employers; buyers of agricultural production	Wolpe (1972); First (1983); agricultural minimum wage of 6,688 MT
Informality shock absorber	Converts visible unemployment into invisible underemployment	Stability of the political system	500,000 entrants vs. 30,000 formal jobs/year
Organisational resource	Sustains budgets, mandates and skilled employment in the aid apparatus	Development aid organisations	Ferguson (1994); Moss et al. (2006)
Political dependence	Increases the political return of discretionary distribution	Actors with allocation power	Olson (1965); Stokes et al. (2013)
Women's care work	Absorbs State failures without any accounted cost	Public budget; households	ILO (2018); Harris-Fry et al. (2017)
Territorial absorption of costs	Populations with low resistance capacity bear displacement	Operators of extractive projects	Gans (1972), cost-absorption function
Discursive legitimation	Converts institutional failure into individual virtue	Responsible institutional actors	Béné et al. (2012); MacKinnon and Derickson (2013)

Note: the functionalities are latent systemic consequences (Merton, 1949); they do not presuppose intentionality or attribution to identified actors.

3. FUNCTIONAL ALTERNATIVES AND THE REASON FOR THEIR NON-ADOPTION

The decisive moment in Gans's analysis is the examination of functional alternatives: measures capable of fulfilling the same systemic function without requiring the existence of poverty. Such alternatives exist for practically all the functions identified.

- Reproduction at zero cost is replaced by the payment of wages and producer prices that cover the effective cost of family reproduction: minimum wages anchored in the cost of an adequate diet and prices that remunerate the labour incorporated. The

cost falls on formal employers and agricultural marketing intermediaries: concentrated, organised groups with access to decision-making.

- Creation of formal employment at scale, which requires productive transformation, investment in agriculture and agro-industry and accessible credit. The cost falls on the budget and on the beneficiaries of the current credit structure, since the expansion of productive credit requires reducing the crowding out caused by domestic debt, which reached 538.3 billion meticais in July 2026 (O Económico, 2026)[25].

- Universalisation of rights and benefits with objective rules and legal enforceability, replacing discretion with entitlement. The cost is political: it removes an instrument from those who hold it.

- Reduction of unpaid care work through public investment in the infrastructure that substitutes for it (piped water, energy, sanitation, transport) and in care facilities (crèches, day centres for the elderly and nearby primary health units), combined with the redistribution of domestic work between men and women. The cost falls on the public budget, which would begin to pay for what it currently obtains free of charge from women's time.

- Full compensation for the economic value of lost livelihoods and effective community participation in decisions. The cost falls on operators and, indirectly, on the country's attractiveness as a destination for investment with low social costs.

- Adoption of verifiable technical standards: the cost of an adequate diet instead of opinions about sufficiency, learning indicators instead of enrolment rates, functionality of infrastructure instead of inaugurations. Its cost is reputational and falls on those who produce public statements that verification would disprove.

In all seven cases, the functional alternative is technically known, often already formulated in Mozambican official documents, and financially demanding but not impossible. In all cases, the cost falls on concentrated, organised groups with access to decision-making, while the benefit is distributed among numerous, dispersed groups with no capacity to demand it. And all require some redistribution of income and power.

[25] O Economico. (2026, 29 July). Bank of Mozambique keeps the MIMO rate at 9.25% and transfers tightening to banking liquidity. https://www.oeconomico.com/banco-de-mocambique-mantem-mimo-em-925-e-transfere-aperto-para-a-liquidez-bancaria/

It is this systematic coincidence that constitutes the most economical explanation for the persistence of poverty in the face of 25 years of diagnostic consensus. It is not necessary to postulate ignorance, generalised incompetence or bad faith; it is enough to note that the measures that would reduce poverty impose identifiable costs on actors capable of avoiding them, and benefit actors without the capacity to demand them. Persistence is not a failure of the system: it is how the system works.

4. CONCLUSION

For 20 years, Mozambique has had a consensual diagnosis and a stable policy prescription, and, over the same period, the poverty rate rose from 48.4% to 62.9%. The proposed explanation is that poverty persists, in part, because it performs systemic functions (unrecognised, unintended, but identifiable) for actors who are not poor, and because the alternatives that would make poverty unnecessary impose concentrated costs on those same actors.

The seven functionalities identified are summarised in Table 1. For each one, without exception, there is a technically defined functional alternative, but the alternative requires some redistribution of income and power.

This also produces an agenda for verification. If the proposed explanation is correct, its implications are observable: measures whose costs fall on concentrated groups should show systematically lower execution rates than measures with diffuse costs, and deviations between approved budgets and executed expenditure should be concentrated in redistributive budget lines. Testing these propositions with available budget execution data is the next step, but it does not require prior consensus on the argument.

The question this Destaque Rural leaves for Mozambican public debate is not whether poverty can be reduced; it can, and the instruments are known. It is whether the country is willing to formulate the question that 25 years of strategic documents have avoided: who loses, and how much, when poverty decreases? Until that question is asked, we will continue to produce correct diagnoses of a problem whose correction they do not solve, and the persistence of poverty will continue to be explained by everything except its cause.

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E-mail: office@omrmz.org
Address: Rua Faustino Vanombe, nº 81, 1º Andar.
Maputo – Mozambique