

## Are We, After All, as Poor as They Say?

### *Cyclone Idai and the Self-determination of the Mozambican people*

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**E**tched into the memory of Mozambicans, 2019 will always remind us of the tragic events of cyclone Idai.

But, as the old saying goes, there is a silver lining to everything<sup>1</sup> “Todo mal vem com o bem,” all bad carries some good with it. Even more insightful, another, Arabic saying teaches us that, “with trouble comes ease”<sup>2</sup> “Com a adversidade vem a facilidade,” with adversity comes facility.” Cyclone Idai brought destruction, yes. Human and material destruction. We lost many compatriots, contributors to the diversity and development of our rich country. We also lost infrastructure: roads, schools, health centers, shopping centers, and other services. The loss of all of this sits atop another loss, which, paradoxically, is also a gain — a gain which was never actually lost.

We gained richness. What richness? Faced with the trails of destruction and suffering left by Idai, how can we speak of any resulting gains? Yes, we gained a richness that we have never lost. We gained the deconstruction of the idea that we are poor. When this idea that we are poor came about is unknown. But this idea has grown stronger over the last several

decades. It grew stronger in the time leading up to Idai. Cyclone Idai not only destroyed lives and infrastructures, it also destroyed the erroneous perception that Mozambique is a poor country.

When Idai came, I did not see poverty. That is to say, the idea of poverty did not enter my head. How so? I saw compatriots from the Rovuma river to Maputo, from the easternmost town of Zumbo to the Indian ocean, taking what little they could and sending it to the provinces of Manica and Sofala. I saw organizing on social media, organizing in the streets, organizing of Mozambican expatriates in the farthest corners of the world as well as Mozambicans from the deepest heart of the country. All of these mobilizations came together under a single idea: to help the brothers and sisters that needed our help. Volunteers, containers full of foodstuffs and clothing, countless material goods from around the country and around the world, all shipped to the provinces devastated by Idai. How could poor people be capable of such noble acts? No, we are not poor. And Idai helped us to see this.

To be sure, some may say that it is the absence of material goods that constitutes poverty. There is a certain legitimacy to this. But this legitimacy is lost in the simplicity of the very argument. How can one limit richness, such a rich concept (which, paradoxically, is the only adjective we can use to describe richness), to material goods? This must be a poverty in the human condition, to reduce richness to access to material goods. Richness is more than this.

Conversely, the absence of compassion, the absence of empathy and solidarity is far more terrible and fearsome than poverty. Without these qualities, even with the possession of material goods, poverty continues. How can someone in possession of such material goods, but devoid of humanism, of philanthropy, and patriotic feeling, be a positive influence on society? How can such a human contribute to the development of humanity if the goods they have will serve only their own ego and nothing more? Inversely, those to whom life has not provided such material possessions, but has given higher moral values, those humans disposed to help others, independent of their own situation, do they remain poor? If we answer in the affirmative, then it is the state of the world that finds itself poor. It is the human condition that deteriorates.

Before Idai, during Idai, and after Idai, they told us, through so many different channels, that one of the world's poorest countries had been devastated by a calamity. But they did not tell us, before, during, or after Idai, that in this country there is a sense of sharing. They did not tell us that in this country there is a sense of compassion and, above all, that this is not a poor country. They did not tell us that the poor people of this country rushed to the aid of other poor people in this same country. They did not tell us that this country of Mozambique, vast and alive, cannot be classified as poor, because its people, the most precious good a country can have, its people are rich and are examples of resilience for the entire world.

They told us, and they still tell us. They told us that we do not have what others have. They tell us that not having what others have makes us poor. That is the problem: they told us, they tell us. And us, what do we say? They compared our rich richness with the richness of others. A *doxa* of material riches was established. But material riches are, often, alien to us. Why do we not speak of various kinds of richness? May we at least, beyond material richness, speak of spiritual richness, mention emotional richness, discuss cultural richness, and share social richness. May we teach the richness of Idai.

How can a people hit with a cyclone as powerful as Idai keep on smiling? How is it that Mozambicans, who lost everything, materially speaking, continue on with shining dreams? Yes, materially speaking, as we did not lose hope in a better future, we did not lose faith in divine aid, we did not lose faith in the human aid from our brothers and sisters. We saw news stories, reports of children the day after the cyclone's passage, playing as the interviewees spoke of their goals for the future.

Cyclone Idai helped us to speak on certain things. Things that were already visible before the cyclone. Things that, even so, went unmentioned. We said that there are various types of richness and that we hold many of them. We said that we have spiritual richness, that we have social richness, that we have emotional richness. But we have so many other types of richness that are not frequently mentioned. We must have all of these in order to lift ourselves back up after a catastrophe like Idai.

There is a commonly accepted idea that we are what we think. And if we are what we think,

why do we not think about the richness that we have at our disposal? Why not think about the nobility that Idai has shown us to be part of our day-to-day lives? Why forget what Idai has taught us? If we are what we think, then let us think of the riches that we have. Perhaps we may then not be as poor as they say we are. In addition to being, we must also show ourselves to be so.

Mozambique. Mozambique and the Mozambicans, my brothers and sisters, are extremely rich! Brothers and sisters, we are not as poor as they say. We are as rich as they fail to say.

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