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Photo by Inge Tvedten

Marginalisation and Poverty in Rural Malanje, Angola

Rural Angola has gone through decades of hardships with war and economic marginalisation – culminating with the current economic crisis. This brief is about ten rural communities in the province of Malanje. It shows that material poverty is so profound that people have reverted to traditional practises and bartering in an economy of near pure subsistence and that basic social services in education and health are practically non-existent. As one man put it:

“The government does not give any support!”

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This is a brief from the research project “Cooperation on Research and Development in Angola” between UCAN/CEIC and CMI, and its sub-project “Urban and Rural Poverty Dynamics”. It is based on qualitative/participatory fieldwork carried out in a rural municipality in the Malanje province – with the objective of understanding people’s own perceptions and dynamics of poverty and well-being.

Introduction

The province of Malanje and the Municipality of Kalandula is located in the north-east of Angola. Its fame is largely based on having Africa’s second highest waterfall, but as opposed to its equals on the continent there is hardly any economic activity devoted to it. Also the centre of the Municipality and its five rural *comunas* (see Map) give an immediate impression of economic despair and depression – exemplified by the dearth of commercial outlets, near-empty markets, precarious buildings, poor roads and children in public spaces at mid-day rather than in school. Socio-economic figures testify to a near-impossible situation for the large majority of the 80.000 living in Kalandula – but most people still cope somehow.

Background

In overall terms, rural poverty in Angola is severe. Official statistics testify to a rural poverty rate of 58 percent as opposed to an urban rate of 19 percent (INE 2013). However, statistics on poverty in Angola is generally considered to be unreliable and underestimated, and more specific socio-economic data indicate an even more serious situation.

A formal rural labour market participation of 79 percent hides the fact that the large majority of Angola’s rural population depend on subsistence agricultural production with very few options for income generation. The rural child mortality rate is 230/1000, which is a sign of multidimensional poverty and deprivation. And while official statistics are saying that 64 percent of all rural children go to school, only 41 percent of rural men and women can read and write (Ibid).

The Province of Malanje is no exception. According to official reports (INE 2016), poverty indicators related to employment, health, education and access to basic services are very severe (see table). Moreover, at the time of our fieldwork, the Angolan crisis following from the downfall of the price of oil had led to even more severe hardships. Prices on basic commodities had leapfrogged and goods had become increasingly scarce, and the already weak public services in education and health were at the verge of collapse.

Table: Basic Socio-Economic Data Malanje

Malanje	2008/2009	2014/2015
Poverty Incidence (%)	62	–
Household size	4,7	5,0
Ratio men/women	–	95/100
Labour force participation (%)	–	60
Inadequate dwellings (%)	96	60
Access to suitable water (%)	52	51
Access to mobile phones (%)	28	27
School completion rate 6–17 yrs (%)	–	35
Child mortality rate /'000	–	230/1000*
Civil registry (%)	–	35

*National rural child mortality rate (UNICEF 2015)

Political Economy

Poverty and well-being in rural and agricultural municipalities like Kalandula is not only the result of contemporary political and economic forces of marginalisation, but also of its history. For Kalandula, the most important historical forces are the colonial legacy of exploitation, the long periods of war following independence in 1975, and the *de facto* marginalisation of rural communities by the current government – all lived history for a large part of the population.

The marginal position of Malanje/Kalandula in Angola’s political economy has important implications for the local political economy. People depend nearly solely on rudimentary agricultural production, there is a very weak purchasing power and basis for informal economic activities, and they depend on traders from Luanda for the most basic commodities.

While intrinsically linked to Luanda through the control and clientism of the MPLA government, the municipal administration is characterised by weak organisational structures and competence, and very limited economic resources. In a system with struggles over limited funds, interventions for the poor have suffered the most. Despite the establishment of a Poverty Reduction Programme, the limited funds transferred from central government have systematically been allocated to other ends or disappeared.

The dearth of resources has also led to a *de facto* collapse of social services in education and health. Among the rural population outside the municipal centre hardly any have access to primary school, there is a constant problem of absent teachers, and most village schools are precarious and run by the community itself – if at all. There is only one secondary school in the Municipality.

Kalandula has one hospital and four health centres, but there is no health personnel present in the villages where the large majority of the population lives. For most of them the closest health institution is between 10-15 km away, forcing people to increasingly rely on traditional doctors/midwives and medicines.

The back side of poor governance and limited resources is corruption – not the type of large scale corruption that characterises Angola’s urban hubs and upper classes but small scale corruption or what people call ‘*gasosa*’. For the poor in Kalandula, this is experienced as more direct and devastating and has an impact on very basic needs including education, health and identity papers.

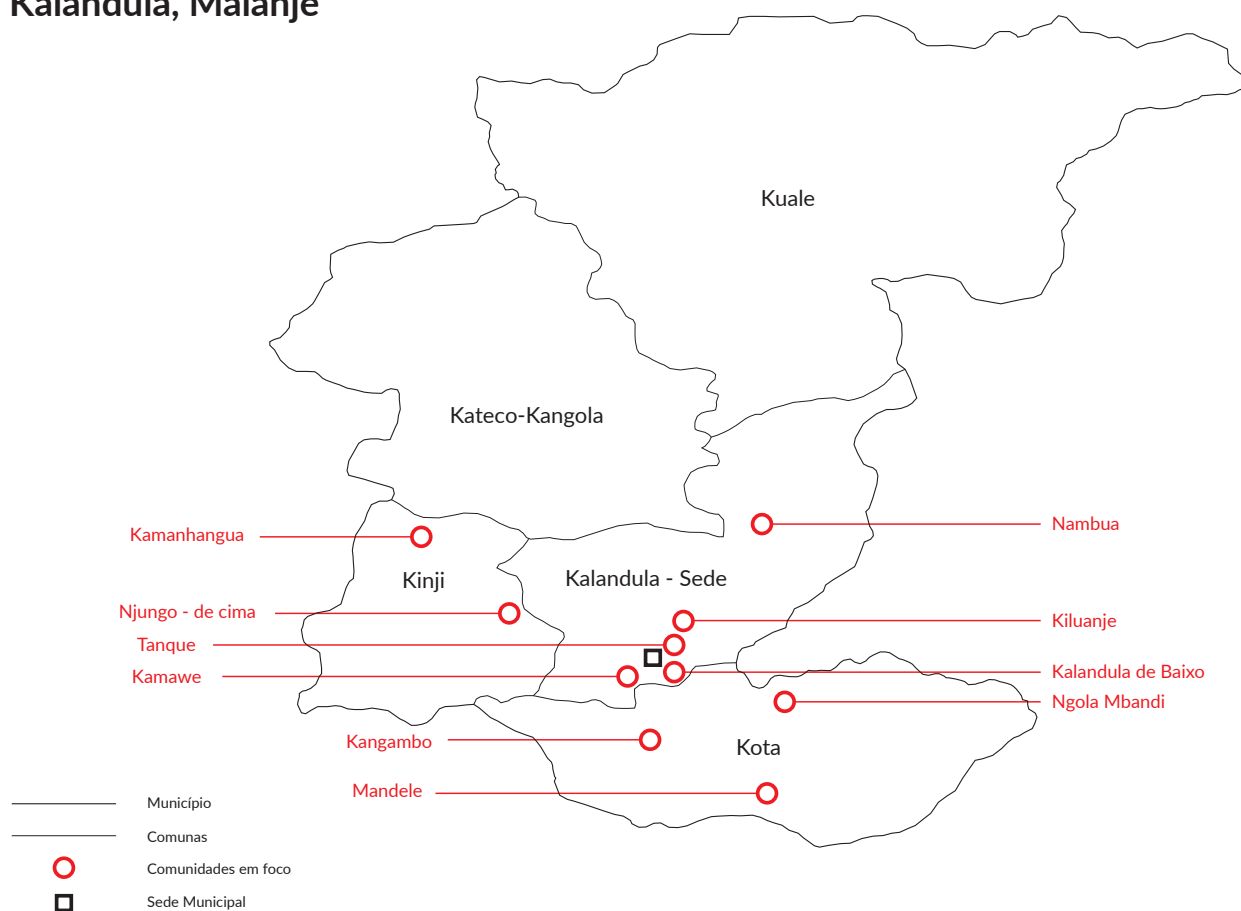
The collapse of public services has made the few non-state actors increasingly important, in particular the Catholic Church with services in education and health and the national NGO ADRA with services in rural development/agriculture – but they are nowhere near filling the gap.

Poverty Dynamics

So how do people cope under such conditions? The following analysis is based on information gathered in ten local communities in the Municipality of Kalandula (see Map)¹, a set of qualitative

1 For logistical reasons, fieldwork could only cover rural communities in the southern half of the Municipality (see Map). Impressions from there, as well as statements from municipal officials, confirm that conditions become increasingly difficult/dramatic the further away from the municipal centre/main road to Malanje City and Luanda one gets.

Kalandula, Malanje



methodologies,² and formal/informal interviews with local powerholders (public employees, traditional leaders/*sobas*, representatives of civil society) as well as men, women and youth in the communities.

The villages in Kalandula are concentrated along dirt roads, usually in the vicinity of a river or creek, and with fields located in varying distances from where people live. In addition to dwellings usually made of mud and grass roofs (*adobe queimado e capim*), the Community Mapping exercise revealed that all the villages comprise a centre around the dwelling of the *soba*, a large number of churches of different congregations, a rudimentary primary school, a water-outlet (usually the river), and in some cases a small commercial outlet – more often than not without any goods.

The 460 villages registered in Kalandula typically have a population varying from 600 to 50 inhabitants, with the exception of the Kalandula Sede with 16.400. While the population was dramatically reduced during the war (with 50 percent between 1973 and 2002, Adm.Mun.de Kalandula 2013: 18), it has doubled since 2003 to 80.000 due to natural increase and because the urban crisis in Luanda has made less people leave and some people return (Tvedten and Lázaro 2016).

Economic Adaptations

Agriculture is the backbone and centre of people's lives in Kalandula, and even more so presently than just a few years ago: Historically important relations with the major urban centres of Malanje City and Luanda are largely cut off, because people cannot afford the journey,

are too poor to invest in trade, and realise that conditions in Luanda in particular are extremely difficult.

Agricultural production is rudimentary, with only the simplest agricultural tools (axes, machetes, hoes) being used. At the same time there is ample access to rainfed land, which formally is owned by the *soba* but effectively controlled by the family who originally occupied it. Some families also use wetland or *hortas* close to rivers.

What determines how much people can produce is their access to/control of labour. The key phases of production (land clearance, planting, weeding, and harvest) are in the outset labour intensive, but partly in order to minimise labour cassava or *mandioc* is by far the most common crop. A larger variety of crops is produced in the *hortas*, but these are more arduous and time-consuming and do not have the same deep cultural connotations as rainfed land.

For the majority of households in the communities, production is hardly sufficient to feed themselves. When people have to sell or barter their *bombó* (cassava flour), this is often to cover absolutely necessary expenses for illness, funerals or other crises – knowing well that this will have to be compensated for with periods of hunger.

The very poorest and most destitute in the communities are those who do not have sufficient access to labour (often but not always single headed households, elders and handicapped), and who have to beg or work for others to survive. Working in the fields of others is not only an extremely badly paid undertaking (usually in kind), but also a violation of the very essence of being a community member.

Except for public sector employees with fixed salaries, very few people in Kalandula have access to other sources of employment and income. Some have managed to maintain relations with urban centres and are engaged in rural-urban trade, involving *bombó* and basic commodities. Other attempts at income generation, such as establishing small marketing stalls, buying motorbikes for transportation or setting up a hairdresser usually fail – simply

² These include Histograms, Community Mapping, Most Important Problems, Venn-Diagrammes and Wealth Ranking (CEIC/CMI 2015). In addition a Socio-Economic Survey was carried out with a total of 240 households, but this does not form part of the current brief.

because there is such a limited market/purchasing power in Kalandula.

Household Strategies

For most households in Kalandula and its members, getting out of poverty is practically impossible under the current circumstances. In the Wealth Ranking exercise, people distinguished between two main levels of poverty – the poor (*ngadiama*) and the very poor/destitute (*kukunhi*). Even for the poor who manage to produce a surplus, the option of climbing to one of the two ‘rich’ categories (*nguenje* and *juama*) associated with life in cities is not seen as realistic.

Traditionally economic as well as social life was centred around a matrilineal kinship system and the extended family, but war, migration and economic hardships has reduced the family network and made the individual household the main socio-economic unit. Being small (with an average of four members, Adm.Mun.de Kalandula 2013:18), it is also very vulnerable to sudden shocks such as crop failure and disease.

Most households have to use practically all their time for agricultural work, with the burden being particularly hard for women who do most of the chores in addition to domestic tasks. Being a single mother is seen as a poor alternative as it usually implies dearth of male labour, makes it very difficult for the woman to marry again and easily carries as stigma of being a ‘prostitute’. Women in polygamous relationships work their own *lavras*, but usually have access to male labour.

Men are still expected to bring income to the household, but their options outside agriculture are very limited. Community based commerce hardly has customers, and the most common type of work – as builders or *pedreiros* – is rare and poorly paid. The most prominent option is to engage in trade with Luanda or other urban centres, but as noted most men are prohibited from this simply by not being able to afford journey let alone pay for accommodation.

Young people often find themselves in the most demanding situation. Many of them have been exposed to a different life-style in Luanda or through media, but have been forced to stay in rural communities that only offers a life similar to that of their parents. Parents complain that their sons in particular do not want to work in agriculture, but they are eventually compelled to make a living on their own and start a family – thus repeating the cycle.

Despite the high level of poverty and the necessity to cater for immediate needs for food and shelter, people still make efforts to improve their future prospects. There are attempts at revitalising traditions of collective agricultural work (*kisole*). They send their children to school by paying local tutors or by making their children walk up to 10 kilometres per day to the closest school. And they form community committees to remedy the absence of public health services, some by organising transport for the very ill (often by tying them to the body of a motorcycle driver...) or by reverting to traditional medicine.

However, a widespread sense of despair has increased with

the current dearth of money and basic social services. While many expressed anger and frustration in conversations with us, such resentment is rarely publically expressed for fear of retaliations from local powerholders. Exceptions are when people feel that their very existence is threatened, as when community land has been sold to external powerholders by *sobas* for setting up agriculture enterprises or *fazendas*. In one case, trespassing and refusal to sign up as labourers ultimately forced the general in question to give up his plan.

But for most people in Kalandula, it is a question of learning to live with the extreme poverty we encountered. Many elders, who have memories of the wars up to 2002 when they lived in constant danger for their lives, emphasise the importance of peace.³ Many with experience from or knowledge of Luanda and other urban centres emphasise the importance of land and agriculture even though it may hardly be enough to survive. And practically everybody seek comfort and support in one of the many churches in the communities and in the immediate neighbourhood – with the larger sense of ‘community’ being in the process of becoming eroded under the pressure of poverty and despair.

Conclusions

In the classic literature on poverty, rural poverty is often seen as more severe than urban poverty in material terms – but with a stronger safety net in the form of traditional institutions and social networks. In Kalandula, long term marginalisation in the form of decades of war and the contemporary political economy have seriously eroded this safety net. In fact, the communities we have studied have to a large extent reverted to the past in the form of a revitalisation of traditional institutions in the absence of an active and performing state and a barter economy involving urban traders in which people are easily exploited.

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3 “Não queremos só que nos melhoraram a nossa vida, mas não queremos a guerra mais, a guerra chega!”



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