

CASE STUDY

Terraço Aberto: a space for public debate in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique

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The article considers *Terraço Aberto* as a forum for debates and innovation in Pemba, Mozambique. Topics to be considered are selected by members of the local community. In this young democracy, the voices of different segments of society are not always equally considered and *Terraço Aberto* makes this possible. The debates take place once per month on the terrace which gave name to the idea, but increasingly in other places, depending on the topic. In order to stimulate new participations and appropriation outside the original terrace, debates are held in a location related to the topic, for example, a debate about erosion will take place where there is erosion. *Terraço Aberto* style events only take place in the province of Cabo Delgado. Replicas in other provinces are part of the plans for the near future.

Keywords: debates, democracy, methodologies, Mozambique

Introduction

Terraço Aberto is a forum for reflective, critical and open debates in Pemba, the provincial capital of Cabo Delgado, northern Mozambique. The name of the forum is a Portuguese translation for ‘Open Terrace’, named after the part of the office where the first debates took place. It was initiated by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation¹ in 2009 to provide a space that promotes democratic thinking and peaceful exchange of opinions in a pluralistic and inclusive society.

Terraço Aberto is also considered an incubator of ideas and a testing area for approaches that not only bring up interesting themes, but support the development of perspectives. The idea is not to produce solutions, but to share, reflect, create and interact, as well as to question one’s own attitudes to adapt to new situations. For instance, concerns around new natural resources, such as the huge gas discoveries in the province, and other extractive industry fields (precious wood and mining) have raised a lot of debate, and is forcing many institutions (public, non-

governmental organisations (NGOs) and other stakeholders) to reshape their opinions and interventions.

The topics of the debates are selected by interested members of different segments of the local society, and updated according to current social, political or economic events. *Terraço Aberto* is organized by a group of volunteers who work as a kind of a think tank, researching the topics, discussing the need for presentations and maintaining contact with the media. The group guarantees the implementation of the event, but also stimulates the linking between different topics and the on-going dialogue towards the goal of how the province should look like in the long term.

Terraço Aberto is financed by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation. Costs are low thanks to the fact that nobody is paid to participate, spaces are free and the members of the managing group are volunteers.

Context

Since the 1960's, Mozambique has experienced different political, social and structural phases, before gaining independence in 1975. Big changes have come about since then. The first years of independence were marked by a civil war that upset and divided the country for 16 years, leaving behind destruction and trauma. The communism ideology adopted after independence slowly turned into a democracy with regular elections, an opening of the market and a more inclusive society. Step by step, Mozambican society increased the use of its right of free expression and political as well as social influence, at least according to the Constitution.

In this young democracy, the voices of different segments of society are not always equally considered. However, on the principle that a country's citizens should have a say in the running of the country as they are the one's who endure the consequences of their actions, it is essential that their voices become self-confident and strong. The opinions of all segments of society have to be taken into account as valuable contributions to the common good; this shows the will to share knowledge to co-develop solutions for oneself and society.

In this context, a forum like *Terraço Aberto* can contribute to harmonious, active and inclusive development, especially because it challenges every individual to realise that other people may have different opinions. At the same time, it nurtures the attitude that there is not necessarily right or wrong, furthering a spirit in which being in favour of or against an idea does not mean being in favour of or against the person who raised it or the institution that defends it.

Principles

The open and participative spirit of *Terraço Aberto* is reflected in all its parts: during the preparation process of the debates, within the managing group, during the debates themselves and through interactive follow ups with tools like social media.

Terraço Aberto encourages a bird's eye view on topics, enabling participants to literally take a different perspective in order to emphasize respect for other opinions, as well as fostering the common understanding that everyone is on the same level and has the same right to participate. *Terraço Aberto* belongs to everyone. Anyone interested can participate with free entrance.

Methodology

The debates take place once per month on the terrace which gave name to the idea, but increasingly in other places, depending on the topic. In order to stimulate new participations and appropriation outside the original terrace, debates are held in a location related to the topic, for example, a debate about erosion will take place where there is erosion.

The debates of *Terraço Aberto* are managed and prepared by a group of volunteers. Members of this group come from different segments of society (i.e. students, teachers, journalists, NGO's, artists) and are a kind of a mirror of the participants of the debates. The group works with resource persons who give inputs from different angles. They also reflect on the best method to conduct the debate, carry out interviews and field visits, coordinate with media and mobilize the participation of secondary, technical and higher education institutions in order to promote new ways of thinking within schools where new generations can be reached.

The informal set-up of the space and a cafeteria-like ambiance with small tables, including a snack, is intended to put participants at ease and eliminate barriers of hierarchy: there is no formal seating order, no uniform direction in which the chairs are facing, and no stage. The setting encourages all participants to contribute according to their points of view, position and capacities.

It is stressed that the knowledge, ideas and possible solutions come from and belong to all participants. The search for these ideas and paths to solutions is supported by discussion methods like world café, an attractive and interactive format that contributes to bringing out

the potential of the participants in a hospitable atmosphere for dialogue. Through this method, participants are invited to physically take different positions and perspectives, to broaden one's perspectives.

A social gathering at the end of the debate gives the opportunity for informal networking, harmonization and the continuation of the debate in smaller groups, if desired. If, during the debate, tension among participants may have risen, this final gathering contributes to the feeling that whatever was discussed should not be taken personally, but considered as a way to gain knowledge that can be useful for one's work or life.

Tools

The use of online tools and social media contributes to the management of the process, the interaction and the sharing of knowledge beyond the provincial and national boundaries.

Terraço Aberto is online at www.terraçoaberto.blogspot.com,
www.facebook.com/terraço.aberto, www.facebook.com/groups/debatepublico.

Topics are proposed through a broad and participatory process *inviting* everyone who is interested, from all segments of society, to participate. To support this, e-mail, Facebook, blogs, SMS, interviews, questionnaires and radio programmes are used as communication tools.

The participants of the first event of each year select and prioritize future topics according to their understanding of the current context (political, economic and social) and importance. Announcements on future events, topic-related documents, links, photos and live comments from completed debate are posted online before and during the event to maximize physical and virtual participation. The uploaded content also acts as a record or minutes of the event.

The online media also provide a space where further contributions can be posted, where the discussion can continue and where contacts can be maintained. This process keeps the topics in people's minds and makes it possible to update them according to new insights and new knowledge gained.

A large screen in a corner of the debate venue allows participants to follow the online contributions, which makes it a real interaction with as many genuinely interested people as possible.

For each debate, people with specific knowledge from civil society organizations (CSOs) engaged in advocacy or working for development, government institutions directly linked to the topic in discussion (from which society expects prompt response for public issues), media (as sources and promoters of information within a challenging political context) and regular members of the community (directly or indirectly affected by the problem in discussion) are invited. They contribute voluntarily with their knowledge and their task is to enlighten the topic from different angles to promote broad-minded knowledge. They also serve as resource persons during the preparation of the event and during the debate itself, but are also participants and therefore are not treated differently to anyone else.

Reflective interludes as alternative forms of expression like music, theatre or poems linked to the topic of the debate, or interviews and short films, feed the perceptions and stimulate the consolidation of the reflections.

The use of a box for anonymous comments, suggestions and critiques is one more tool which invites participants to feel included and free to express themselves, underlining the importance and value of every opinion contributed. It also helps some participants to gradually gain the courage to speak publicly.

Impact of the forum on developments

Terraço Aberto has managed to motivate civil society, government, media and ordinary people to engage in replicas or participation in similar debating initiatives. Several successes include:

- At provincial level, several replicas of *Terraço Aberto* took place. Three of them were held by the cultural association Tambo Tambulani Tambo on initiation rites, rights of minorities and the deficient suburban public transport.
- A study on human trafficking held by the School of Ethics, Citizenship and Development Studies (EEECD) culminated in a public debate organized in collaboration with *Terraço Aberto*.
- The Natural Resources Thematic Group has won a tender from the French Embassy to promote advocacy campaigns, based on *Terraço Aberto* style debates.
- A provincial Water and Sanitation Group was established soon after a *Terraço Aberto* session that debated water issues.
- Community radios like Rádio sem Fronteiras and Rádio Televisão Comunitária Nacedje transmit *Terraço Aberto* debates and use some of the interventions in their news bulletins.
- Nacedje started a Facebook page and e-mail news update after having assisted a *Terraço Aberto*.

- A youth group implemented a version of *Terraço Aberto* discussing specific youth issues in villages and suburbs.

Although there are sometimes disagreements between Government and Civil Society, some Government institutions have engaged in partnership with *Terraço Aberto* to promote debates of controversial issues such as policies for handicapped and elderly people (Provincial Directorate for Women and Social Affairs) and tobacco business and consumption (Provincial Directorate of Health). A partnership was also created during a *Terraço Aberto* event between Pemba Municipality, CSOs and some universities to collaborate on waste management initiatives.

Participation in debates has increased:

- Some national level CSOs such as the Public Integrity Centre (CIP) and Economic and Social Research Institute (IESE) sponsor their staff to participate in the debates.
- An international journalist from Global Voices² learned about the initiative through the *Terraço Aberto* Facebook page. Touched by the interventions of the participants she published an article on the Global Voices webpage³ and personally attended one of the debates, by invitation of a national newspaper (Jornal @Verdade) during one of the national electoral processes, after which she published another article.

Due to the low technology level in the province, in every debate instructions are given on how to use social media tools and participants are invited to practice on their own afterwards (many of them are using smartphones). This enables people to access debate notes and reports on the *Terraço Aberto* blog and Facebook pages.

Capacity building measures for the members of the managing group are also an important part of the process. The members are volunteers who benefit from their participation, through gaining new skills in moderation techniques, the use of social media, photojournalism in a rapidly changing environment and qualitative research methods. This in turn strengthens the future of *Terraço Aberto* as it depends on capable and motivated ‘drivers’. An added value is the growing interaction between *Terraço Aberto* participants with other online debate platforms⁴.

Conclusions

At the moment, *Terraço Aberto* style events only take place in the province of Cabo Delgado. Replicas in other provinces are part of the plans for the near future. Looking at the

connection of regions and increasing thematic links between like-minded people are important, especially if similar problems in different geographical areas such as climate change, fair natural resource management, holistic nutrition or cultural questions are taken into account.

The hope is that *Terraço Aberto* can contribute to broadening people's minds, while debating complex issues in a peaceful, open and sensitive way. It also provides a means to realistically deal with changing situations and foster inclusive development, which is needed in African countries. Knowledge sharing and its best possible management are keys to harmonious development. To develop something efficiently, the context has to be understood in all its aspects. Opinions on these aspects can diverge, but – put together in a peaceful dialogue – all can contribute to development. Diverging worldviews do not necessarily mean conflict. Sometimes a strong opinion only means a genuine interest. And opinions can change with new knowledge gained. Giving space for different opinions to be expressed, providing the opportunity to peacefully share knowledge, ideas and suggestions increases overall knowledge and co-develops locally born solutions. This is why *Terraço Aberto*, owned and driven by its participants, is a powerful approach.

References

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¹ www.helvetas.org/mozambique, a Swiss Organization working in Mozambique since 1979 in Rural Development

² www.globalvoicesonline.org

³ <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/12/21/transparency-in-extractive-mega-projects-in-mozambique/>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/naturais.amigos.cd/?fref=ts>