In early 2013 the government of Timor-Leste announced it would create a ‘special economic and social market zone’ (ZEESM) in Oecussi district. Land is being taken from the population, without apparent compensation or due process, to build infrastructure intended to facilitate foreign investment the government hopes will transform the enclave into a regional transport, tourism and industrial hub complete with luxury accommodation, an international airport and a new power station. Plans call for US$4.11 billion to be spent over 30 years in pursuit of this vision, with US$1.36 billion drawn from public funds and the remainder from the private sector (La'o Hamutuk 2015). To this end the enclave has been placed under a new governance regimen, known as the ‘Special Administrative Region of Oecussi-Ambeno’. Its leader, former prime minister Mari Alkatiri, was appointed by the president of Timor-Leste for an indefinite term and is not directly answerable to the people he governs. Speaking privately, locals indicated that this, combined with his armed security detail, have made him a remote and unapproachable figure for many.

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken between July 2014 and May 2015. During this time I lived in an area affected by the project and participated in the day-to-day lives of the district’s farmers and fisherfolk. I aim to convey how ZEESM is being experienced by Oecussi’s agrarian majority, a perspective largely invisible to outsiders.

**The People of Oecussi**

The people of Oecussi are mostly small-scale farmers from the Meto ethno-linguistic group, the majority language of West Timor. While ZEESM was welcomed by many as a potential source of employment and inclusive economic development, this optimism was quickly clouded by anxiety over the widespread seizure of land and destruction of property. As of May 2015 hundreds of homes around the main town had been spray-painted with numbers to mark their imminent demolition to make way for a new four-lane road, an impoverished hamlet had been removed for a luxury hotel and a swathe of woodland had been cleared for an international airport. Given that the struggles faced by households in Oecussi include poor rural roads, ineffective schools and health challenges such as leprosy, tuberculosis and lack of access to nutrition and water, residents voiced concern and confusion at the way ZEESM seemed to be giving priority to these projects over their own basic needs.

In their language, Uab Meto, the farmers of Oecussi refer to themselves as ‘Atoin Pahan’ (people of the land). This title evokes their close relationship with the land, where forests and gardens provide both nutrition and a locus for spiritual practice. Though the cash economy is now important, access to land is still the basis of economic and emotional security for many, and even those with paid jobs raise maize, vegetables and livestock for consumption and sale.

Most follow both Catholicism and a form of animism referred to as ‘the rock and the tree’ (*fatu ma hau*). In this system divisions between spiritual and worldly matters are blurred. Ancestral and elemental spirits (*nitu* and *pah tuaf*) demand diligent custodianship of sacred places, clan histories and land, and failure to comply is widely believed to lead to disaster.

Although the Meto are often described as ‘subsistence farmers’, this is an oversimplification. People shuttle between the market and the village, juggling ritual and family obligations in the highlands with education and wage-labour in the lowlands. The social support embedded within this flexible lifestyle has made it both a platform for development and a redoubt in hard times. Families pool their resources to educate children, country cousins come to stay and people start small businesses. Moving communities and repurposing agricultural and residential land might well weaken this system.

**The Road and the Hotel**

In mid-2015 the two projects most directly affecting local residents were the widening of Oecussi’s main lowland road and the construction of a luxury hotel. In conversation with
locals it was clear that many found the destruction associated with these projects disruptive to their peace of mind as well as their daily routines — memories of the widespread destruction of 1999 made the prospect of mass house demolitions particularly traumatic.

The road project, deemed necessary by ZEESM to facilitate the large-scale economic expansion it envisions, will roughly double the width of Oecussi’s core thoroughfare. From the Indonesian border at Sakato to the inland market of Pasar Tono, approximately 30 km through the district’s most populated area, virtually every roadside structure, tree and garden will be destroyed.

Residents said they first became aware of this plan in early 2014 and most reported receiving no written notice, clear time line or solid details on payouts. Community meetings seemed to do little to allay confusion and publicly displayed billboards were puzzling; one appeared to suggest Oecussi would receive golf courses and a ‘water park’. The evident lack of care taken to reassure Oecussi residents is striking when contrasted to the money spent reaching out to potential investors. In 2013 ZEESM spent US$194,000 on advertising in a Singapore newspaper and US$223,000 on an office in Dili (La’o Hamutuk 2015).

In May 2015, I watched along with community members as machinery began demolishing roadside trees, fences and gardens, with houses following later. Although some money for construction labour and building materials has since been distributed, residents report that everything else, including land, fruit trees and gardens, was cleared without compensation.

The hotel project is located west of Pante Makassar at a place known as Oe-Upun, an impoverished hamlet consisting of around 12 huts. Sources close to the community described how, in early 2014, they were told they would have to make way for a hotel built with the purpose of first housing VIPs attending a large celebration in November 2015 to mark the 500th anniversary of Portuguese colonisation and, later, wealthy tourists. With no paperwork to back their residence in the area, the government was unwilling to pay the compensation they needed to rebuild, and they refused to leave. This standoff shut down preparations for construction during September and October 2014 until, under political pressure and fearful of a confrontation, the construction company paid each household around US$2000 to leave.

Contractors working on the project explained to me that the hotel was largely prefabricated in China and delivered to Oecussi by ship in late 2014. Despite the presence of managerial staff from Malaysia and Singapore and a construction crew from Greece, it was not fully assembled in time for the celebrations. Those living nearby expressed dismay over their government evidently prioritising luxury accommodation over their basic needs, and pointed out that in neighbourhoods around the hotel the ill-maintained Indonesian-era water distribution system was still awaiting rehabilitation, and people were being forced to fall back on potentially dangerous local wells.

Conclusion

For the Meto of Oecussi land is not a liquid asset to be freely exploited nor sold to strangers for profit, but rather the basis of mutually supportive, spiritually embedded and economically resilient communities. In the past these communities have formed the basis for ground-up economic development and provided security from an unreliable global economy. The question in Oecussi is not so much whether ‘development’ will occur, as which model will predominate. By remaking Oecussi in line with its own internationalised and monetised perspective, ZEESM risks disempowering the population by replacing a locally controlled model with one designed and implemented through outside expertise and money, and largely in disregard for Meto preferences and beliefs.

Author Notes

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Endnote

1. Author’s translation. The zone is most often referred to by its Portuguese name ‘Zonas Especiais de Economia Social de Mercadu de Timor-Leste’, usually shortened to ZEESM.

Reference

La’o Hamutuk 2015, Special Economic Zone In Oecusse.