

# The Harsh Fight against Poverty in Sao Tome and Principe<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*Starting, on one side, with a reflection about the history and political vicissitudes of the post-independence, and on the other hand, the testimonies from Sao Tomeans individuals from different social conditions and different degrees of political responsibility, this article approaches some possible connections between poverty and micro-violence in Sao Tome and Principe. It is offered an outline of research for the difficulties of the eradication of poverty and, concomitantly, the diffusion of a growing feeling of social disruption, processes in all contrary to the promises of independence for this archipelago.*

Frequently, the archipelago's visitors make hasty opinions about the imaginary effortlessness of governing two islands with less than one hundred and fifty thousand citizens. However, contrary to this very common prejudice, the micro-insularity is considered an obstacle to development, a notion shared by many Sao Tomeans. Could micro-insularity equally be, under this outlook, an impoverishment-inducing factor?

Regarding the development, there is some truth in this diagnosis, which the Sao Tomeans also use to justify their current difficulties. Throughout the 70s and 80s, the MLSTP – Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe (Movement for the Liberation of Sao Tome and Principe) endorsed a development founded on an expansion of cacao cultures, at the expenses of an intensified production rate, and on an incipient industrialization, which was intended to avoid importations and economic dependency. At the time, the Sao Tomeans leaders justified the rising daily difficulties, quite the opposite of the promises made during the independence, with an economic disarticulation resulting from the gradual abandonment of economic infrastructures inflicted by the last batch of colonists, which affected the cacao plantations too. Simultaneously, both the inefficiency and cost of the industrial endeavors launched after the independence and the erosion of labor and social relationships in nationalized farms had been rather neglected.

Following the recent colonialism, exerted in farms and rooted in social immobilism and, in particular, in the employment of foreign labor force, the independentist project erected an economic construct under the State's tutelage, which implied, for instance, a contention and diminishment of the ceiling of opportunities available for the accomplishment of individual aspirations. In those times, insularity has also allowed the Sao Tomean government to prevent and restrain social changes, having for that enforced a stance of relative detachment toward the world and, in the economic sphere, quite opposing to free enterprise. Additionally to the reverence regarding the authorities – though a heritage from the colonial age, it was reinforced during the post-

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<sup>1</sup> This research results from field research conducted in January 2008 and January/February 2009 in Sao Tome, where Santomean individuals from different economic and social conditions were interviewed. Interviews to political leaders and experts from international institutions were also conducted.

independence – the resultant social immobilism has supported the establishment of a notion of social peace that was, apparently, undeniable.

After 1975, the social changes were monitorized by a tutelary State which, having imposed itself the provision of social services, has claimed the task of development promoter. Thus, the State framed most of the economic activities and limited individual enterprises. Given the apparent availability of natural resources, survival was guaranteed and poverty was not a menace. The *exploitation of men by men* was more discussed about than poverty. Development was an independentist's goal, as was also the distribution of wealth previously retained by white people, an assertion to which was subjacent the manipulation of resentment against the racial cleavage and the consequent power asymmetry in the colonial period. The residences for farm administrators, in contrast to the housing reserved to the field workers, were an unequivocal proof of the plentiful riches to be distributed. Such goals had very little to do with poverty and even less to do with hunger which, while episodic, very few had imagined it would prevail over Sao Tome and Principe.

During the colonial period, poverty did not pose an issue. Discreetly, some harbored racist conceptions attributed poverty to laziness. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the struggle against the designated mendicity would be shaped by a repressive perspective, without any main drive, since poverty was self-marginalizing itself<sup>2</sup>. The substitution of a repressive force for a more paternalistic stance during the last few years of colonialism had not eliminated that prejudice which the Europeans, many of them from low social classes, had used to justify their status. The charity activities manifested a vision of poverty as a human fatality, particularly a racial one. While a fatality, poverty did not derive from the economic extroversion, the farmers' hegemony or from the colonial political construct. During the last years of colonialism, the political support to charitable activities, moderators of the inescapable human condition, had the purpose of capitalizing the political fidelity of the islanders.

After the independence, the matter was not about poverty, but instead about *difficulties*. In a mechanicist manner, they were blamed on the legacy of *exploitation of men by men*, at last disavowed by the collective appropriation of production assets. For a while, the exaltation of independence promoted this conviction. However, the human nature would reveal to be more complex than expected by the advocates of *the new man*, and the country would endure impoverishment, unexplainable only if taken into consideration the colonial legacy and the unfavorable evolution of the cacao prices at the international market in the 80s.

Among the causes for poverty is the failure of development policies canonized in the 70s. This failure is not solely attributable to the mistake of perpetuating a cacao monoculture<sup>3</sup>. Neither, according to a more ideological interpretation – of a disguisedly racial or anti-occidental nature – can the poverty of the Sao Tomeans only be imputed to

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<sup>2</sup> About the marginalization of the Santomean population during the 50s, see Tenreiro (1961: 174).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Santo, Armindo (2008). Nowadays, it is easy to criticize the adoption of cacao cultivation as the platform for development, but it is doubtful that thirty years ago it seemed profitable and viable to begin new economic ventures. In any case, the options were less economic than political. To the above mentioned land worth while instrument for social stratification and power distribution, a fact that, for example, lead to the nationalization of farms instead of the distribution of lands (concerning this topic, see Eyzaguirre, 1986). The political and social construct built upon the income from the cacao cultivation not only penalized agricultural exportations as also damaged the outline of diversification of farming cultures started in the last years of colonialism.

the dogmatism of the PAE - Programas de Ajustamento Estrutural (structural adjustment programs) arrived to the archipelago in second half of the 80s decade.

The poverty and the schemes for accessing sanctioned goods have brought along corruption, moral profligacy and an increase of clientism<sup>4</sup>, and this has caused a disbelief in regards of the possibility overcoming rising social divides and eradicating poverty in the country.

An ideologized vision will make the intersection of corruption with the colonial legacy and, more recently, with poverty. However, in relation to the first connection, it's a notion out of touch with reality and it confounds exploitation and corruption. In relation to the second implication, it may be said that corruption is related to poverty, but it is more appropriate to say that from corruption comes an aggravation of poverty in the country.

In line with *street* intuition and *bush* intuition, the cause for poverty resides in *politics*. Unlike societies whose poor are a minority and, because of this, there is a conviction they are responsible for their own poverty and are living at the expense of the state, in Sao Tome and Principe where the percentage of poor is substantial, the accountability over poverty is ascribed to the *politicians*.

These predispositions, poured over years of impoverishment, are relevant because they sprout from an antagonism between rulers and ruled that is contrary to social cohesion and, therefore, contrary to possibilities of responding to any challenge for the reduction poverty.

### **Post-independence evolution**

During the final years of colonialism were implemented basic services for education and healthcare. These services, now deemed indicators of social integration and decreased poverty, have been expanded throughout the post-independence period for the satisfaction of basic social needs, the consolidation of foundations for economic development and, additionally, the hypothetical political return in terms of popular support to the independentist leadership.

Dogmas related to developmental policies set by the State and to the construction of social and political cohesion through the configuration of consciences and formation of a *new man* have led the rulers to exert efforts to construct the State and to continually expand the deliverance of basic social services. Already then, in the 80s, on account of an unsatisfying economic productivity and a dive of share values for cacao production, it became complicated to maintain those social contributions without increasing the public debt. Those efforts were anchored in agricultural taxations. For that, and also because of the presumption of better rationalization and efficiency of a political centralization for economic decisions, the proprietary structure had been practically preserved, only with the European being substituted by Saotomeans in the farm's hierarchy after their respective nationalization. Veiled or dubious promises made concerning the distribution of lands among workers were forgotten, given the lack of interest in creating an economic structure based on the free market, as it was opposing the ideological vein of the independentist leaderships.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see Bonfim, João (2000: 65).

Nevertheless, few people could have predicted this country's impoverishment. The *nationals* had very little money, but the archipelago was not poor. The future seemed to be straightforward, just a matter of redistributing the wealth once expatriated by white people, who had been anyway symbolically swept away during the transitional period to the independence.

The difficulties of those first years have brought up many justifications concerning the obstacles found in farms. Still quoting the disinvestment performed by ex-colonists in their plantations, those justifications have put in evidence the inconvenience of preserving the former proprietary structure and, furthermore, the issues resulting from a labour arrangement under state regulation. This labour arrangement replicated an asymmetry increasingly loathed by the workers, either for denying the alleged African fraternity and equality, either for revealing itself as inept or as a probable cause for the deterioration of living conditions.

Each day, farms would stop being useful for the development, among other reasons, as it is presently known, for placing all laborers under a strict dependency of the State or its respective agents, hindering the ability to pursue individual endeavors. From this stance, occurred in the post-independence period a sort of prolongation of colonialist practices, aggravated by a loss of former efficiency. The proficient performance was damaged by a veiled coercion intended for a reverential acceptance of the authority of commissioners integrated in entrepreneurial units. To be a *national* has not become synonymous of having more rights, since in effect those rights ended up deflated, but of having more duties, among them the responsibility of abiding to strict rules of behavior which, in an apparently paradoxal manner, were undefined. Were being followed pathways conducting not only to social cohesion, but also to a partition between those inside the circle of power and those outside it. In reality, if any social cohesion still exists, it is not as much the result of social parity than due to specific factors like, for instance, an improbable starvation and an absence of memories about previous political conflicts.

Nowadays is being the end of the post-colonial State<sup>5</sup>. For some, this will mean that after the mistake of adopting a Eurocentric model of state will be observed a dismantling of the last colonial legacy that is the colonial State ruled by Independentists. In Sao Tome and Principe, such event should be nuanced. Given the cultural integration along the centuries, the State cannot be considered just an instrument of modern colonialism. Yet, even if it were, the leaders did make use of the political arrangement and social legacy left behind by the colonialism in the first years of independence. However, this outlook about the evolution of this newborn country began also because of the similarity with the regulating and assistentialist State's performance at the end of colonialism. In the comparison with the colonial State, Sao Tomean citizens typically criticize the bureaucratic load, and in particular the ongoing ineffectiveness of the independentist State.

Anchored in social immobilism, since the labor market was inexistent, the colonial State of dictatorial nature had almost completely eliminated the antagonism (including a past of violence in the farms), indicating all potential individual aspirations and trajectories. At this time, within a single-party regime, that legacy was exploited by the MLSTP for the imposition of a contained environment of social peace, which the popular rebellion against the census in August 1979 was unable to refute.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Young (2004).

These records contribute to deem what could have resulted from decades of prevention of conflict as just a Sao Tomeans' idiosyncrasy. Now, that modern colonialism legacy seems to be vanishing. There are increased tensions and recrudescing violence – for example, aggressive acts against the authorities, conflicts between police officers and their respective commands, shotguns exchanged among the soldiers guarding the governmental palace – which may return the archipelago to a condition of borderless land that, according to historians, had endured for centuries<sup>6</sup>.

### **Voluntarism and constraints to the political evolution**

In May 25<sup>th</sup> 2007, president Fradique de Menezes alluded to the African continent and the connection between development, on one hand, and peace and stability, on the other<sup>7</sup>. Would Fradique de Menezes restraint himself to a pedagogic implementation, in favor of political stability, a facilitating condition for governing? Without speculating, wouldn't he want to refer also to the archipelago, introduced into a path of africanization and, in any case, further submitted to political turbulence?

No matter what, a single question remains: how is it possible, despite the image the Sao Tomeans promote about themselves, that Sao Tome and Principe has turned into a country where the prevention of violence became compulsory in everyday politics, especially since 2003, occasion of the second attempted coup in the archipelago? Putting aside incidents of clientism and corruption mentioned in official documents, the question is: is it possible for a society to resist a constant erosion of trust in its politicians? Certainly, it could be possible the survival of individuals and probably of some groups, but taking poverty into consideration, it will be hard to construct a cohesive society in such political environment.

During the period of independence there were no situations of conflict, neither were there fights against the colonists. Apart from the creation of a *fight* in Sao Tome after the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, when the students got committed in the diffusion and proclamation of the independentist ideal, the transition process was relatively peaceful. Tendentially, the nation coincided with the territory and the MLSTP was engaged in solving any divergences of ethnic nature, then not professed as such, principally given the alleged cultural integration. The regime's authoritarianism was not particularly repressive (despite the arbitrariness of detentions, occurred only one death in prisons and eventually the detainees were inducted throughout the years). Nevertheless, the implementation of policies in the post-independence period was in itself violent, seeing as it forced swift changes to the daily routine. While the nationalist exaltation from the first years was vanishing in the face of increasing daily difficulties, these hardships caused aggravation to the Sao Tomeans. Fidelity to leadership was fading and labor commitment was lacking, however a number of law enforcement displays managed to dissuade any potential dissension. The noticeable failure of a regime which defied the temperament

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<sup>6</sup> In theory, it seems hard to concede a larger importance to "historical roots" than to "social change" in the definition of the destiny of any society. As such, I do not partake in an interpretation of historical relevance – in this instance, the archipelago being a borderland for centuries – which would then become a kind of condition for the Sao Tomean destiny. But it does not remove any interpretational value to recognize the endurance of conflicts in the archipelago, mostly until the arrival of modern colonialism, cf., for example, Caldeira (1999: 46).

<sup>7</sup> *Jornal Horizonte* in <http://www.cstome.net>, consulted in May 2007.

"Peace" has become once again the focus of interest during the commemoration of the 34th independence anniversary, cf. "Reporter", RTP África, July 13<sup>th</sup> 2009.

of the Sao Tomean people – meaning it defied their self-image, seen in the 80s as opposed to experimentations of socializing nature, such as those carried out after the independence – has produced a yearn for political *change*, for which, it must be recalled, there was no notorious political and social pressure from the part of the population<sup>8</sup>.

After the euphorically welcomed *change*, multipartisanism did not result in an efficient administration, a flourishing economy or a transparent market, neither occurring any real economic growth. Although not assessable to the new regime, this evolution is partially due to political and institutional behaviors marked by clientism and endemic corruption. In a more ostensive manner than in the single-party system, external resources were used for private consumption and distribution among clientele<sup>9</sup>.

Practically since the independence, there had been mounting livelihood difficulties which deregulated social bonds and separated the population from the political management of the country. Otherwise, through a point of view more related to the present situation, these difficulties have supported the perversion of the political and social environment, having the population become more susceptible to processes such as the purchase of consciences, the so-called *banho* (bath). The decay of political and social accords and of purposes such as fighting poverty resultant from this process should not to be neglected.

In a sense, inside a context of impoverishment, the successive failures of these providentialist expectations have disconnected the general population from the politicians, visibly emphasizing the lack of political and civic participation occurred in second half of the last century of colonialism. In some manner, the high degree of dependency of the inhabitants either on the State or on managers may be attributed to colonialism, since a substantial part of the population worked in farms that regulated their daily lives from the instant of their birth. In the colonial age there was no political representation for the Sao Tomean population, except for the one staged by the dictatorial regime. The post-independence prolonged this situation. In spite of the country's sovereignty, the coercion of individual liberty had come along with the centralization of political decisions limited to a reduced group at the summit of the MLSTP. Despite the sponsored associativeness, the political and social inactivity have remained a trait of the collective life in the archipelago, a quite significant feature for the ability to pursue the individual endeavors required for overcoming deprivation.

Steadily, the economic failures and the deceit of their leaders, professed in the unavoidable personal interaction among Sao Tomeans, have originated a diffuse and bitter, but politically innocuous, criticism. These days, in the midst of the individualized and atomistic, though largely disseminated, perceptions of Sao Tomeans disappointed with politics, the most prevalent is the impossibility of reverting the country's trajectory of failure. Amid attacks against politicians rooted in rumors<sup>10</sup>, this perception demonstrates the impotency of having no influence over the course of events.

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<sup>8</sup> There are divergences concerning the factors of change from a single-party to a multi-party system. The authors involved with the MLSTP emphasize the internal political dynamic, particularly in the midst of the own party (for example, see BRANCO and VARELA, 1998). Others (SEIBERT, 1999) highlight the economic failure and the external pressures for political change. For a more circumstantial exposition of the different analyses about change, see Nascimento (2007: 74 and ss).

<sup>9</sup> Definition from Seibert (1999: 290).

<sup>10</sup> About the rumors as a form of criticism of politicians see Seibert (2005); also Branco and Varela (1998: 44).

Sao Tomeans politicians have less moral strength to express models of behavior for they are allegedly involved in corruption networks. The absence of ethic – or at least of a conventional and legally consented ethic – has repercussion on the government and on a setting rather favorable to the institution of projects for fighting poverty, on account of objections posed by a mounting social anomaly.

Sao Tome and Principe faces economic hardships and, mostly down to a social and political crisis that viciously (endorses and) results from the dissolution of social control mechanisms. Alongside the steadily decreasing proficiency of the State, such dissolution of the social controls makes inapt the existent labor force and damages the authority, either by lacking tangible goals, either by endorsing mistrust in the political and moral suitability of the political leadership.

### **Economic environment and the prevalence of poverty**

The present economic stage is rather contradictory. Recently, it seems to be more prospective activities by means of which wealth can be redistributed, though in an uneven mode. More effortlessly than in the 80s decade, “middle class” people have the option to build masonry houses and others, less prosperous, to build wood houses. Nevertheless, this redistribution does not erase the perception of asymmetries, and neither lessens the resentments anchored in memories and experiences of serious deprivation. This resentment is permanently updated, because the ruin of the social censure during the single-party age relating to the enrichment of the political class has paved the way to the ostentation of richness, next to which well-meaning discourses about the end of poverty become derisory. Besides, only a small portion of that wealth reaches the hands of the underprivileged.

Part of those underprivileged do search for convenience in the informal economy’s *boom*<sup>11</sup>. The business volume developed in the designated parallel economy appears to be extremely large, but for the general population the obtainable gains are few. Regardless of the income and, occasionally, of the savings some people acquire in the informal economy, it may be relevant to have more conservative and cautious approaches regarding the economic and social benefits of informality. For instance, it may be argued that, in theory, the informal economy represents a waste of labor resources and opportunities to produce value, although in the archipelago the formal economy and formal market do not offer better options than those of the informality. In compensation, in spite of the unsolidary practices performed in the informal economy, there is a noticeably subjacent political worth<sup>12</sup>. The informal economy provides almost spontaneously a social cushion, since it helps to accommodate each person with his or her respective destiny. In the case of this archipelago, this social alleviator joins the prodigality of nature, which permits to assess with quite some certainty that no poor will ever die from starvation; unless if he/she is submitted to a complete marginalization, as occasionally happens.

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<sup>11</sup> It did not occur here any ideological bias that, alongside the neoclassic reasoning, would allow to consider the activity in the informal sector as activities of mere survival (about this subject, see Grassi (2003: 257). In any case, not only it must be taken in consideration the differentiation of incomes and the social hierarchy among the individuals involved in the informal economy, as it should be avoided ideological apriorisms similar to those of the neoclassic reductionism.

<sup>12</sup> Attaining to features with diverse economic and social nature, it must be said that the precariousness is the standard for labor relations inside the informal economy; however, the informal economy supplies goods at lower prices and affords incomes that, though low, are still essential for the everyday living of those surviving from it.

As demonstrated by the trafficking during the first years of the single-party era, the informal economy was established before the programs of economic liberalization, designed to feature the archipelago's economy in a different manner. A more normative and idealist perspective of the path toward economic revitalization shows the return to the land as a desirable occurrence<sup>13</sup>. Although reinforced by a recent validation of agriculture within the present conjuncture, such economic desideratum seems to have arrived belatedly to the dispute for the affectation of labor. Commerce and other urban activities form the preferences of the Sao Tomeans.

The land allocation happened after a forceful recognition of the failure of the State's economic leadership in the agricultural sector and, must be added, of private foreign entities which, risking little or nothing of their assets, were deemed capable of performing a better job than the agents of this nationalized economy. Deriding the social changes occurred since the independence that had psychosocially disabled a substantial part of the labor force for farming works in similar terms to those of the colonial period, they misevaluated the predisposition of former farm laborers for productive engagement in exchange of meager wages.

With the distribution of lands – a social engineering project that has clearly worsened social inequalities, once more not in favor of the workers – the State tried to free itself from the expensive social liability and, simultaneously, to restrict social degradation. It is doubtful that the distribution of lands has increased the national wealth, although it might allow for a decrease in poverty, mostly through the spread of food cultivation, to which are added paltry revenues from the trade of small cacao crops. After some initial improvement in local market provisions and in the fight against extreme poverty, came the stagnation of economic indicators, and the discouragement spread among the land beneficiaries. The property allocation has not barred the rural exodus toward the city and other locations. In 1981, 52% of the active population was involved in agriculture. In 1991, this activity absorbed only 22% of this population<sup>14</sup>. Farming does not provide revenues or social differentiation, a perceptible fact to those who crave for living standards, both in the countryside and in the cities. A few individual cases are not enough to invalidate this low propensity for agriculture, which then faces some issues, not only of economic but also of social nature. Concerning the economic issues, small dimension and disarticulation of the market are obstacles to an activity with insecure revenues like agriculture.

The recent economic evolution in Sao Tome and Principe may be having effects on the contention of increases in poverty. However, it does not appear to be founded on bases which suggest a capacity to reduce poverty and, concomitantly, to unhurriedly promote human development and sustainable development.

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<sup>13</sup> Although not so commonly discussed nowadays, this was one of the slogans for the political discourse that followed along the process for distribution of lands started in the decade of 1990. In the same manner, it constituted a theme for several master dissertations defended by Santomeans experts.

<sup>14</sup> Data referred by Bonfim, Feliciano (2007: 17).



## Poverty indicators (%)

Year	Poverty	Poverty Line	Extreme Poverty
1987	36	23	13
1990	41	33	8
1992	48	39	9
1994	46	35	11 <sup>15</sup>
1996	40 <sup>16</sup>		
1999	45 <sup>17</sup>		
2001	53.8	38.7	15.1 <sup>18</sup>
2005	50		15 <sup>19</sup>
2015	20.5	16.5	4 <sup>20</sup>

It is observed in the archipelago a high populational concentration in the urban and suburban areas. Part of the metropolitan population, in constant expansion, is composed of displaced persons, looking for opportunities, structures and dwelling conditions that are inexistent at the present time and will probably remain so in the medium-term. It is being solidified by youths who, after having completed their secondary education, then have a tough time finding professional careers, and such occurrence will, at some point, cause problems to the college graduates soon returning to the country.

As reality is intertwined with poverty, it seems appropriate to talk about the *disempowerment* concerning the masses congregated within urban spaces while earning their living with menial expedients, as the repercussions this life pattern has on the production of a particular political and social environment are yet to be determined.

However, without forgoing the low living standards, the outskirts around the city of Sao Tome seem to be providing more opportunities to get by. In other words, the current location of poverty – mostly absolute poverty – is the *bush*<sup>21</sup>. Here are observable cases of economic retrocession, discernible in the circumstances of some people abandoning their homes and exchanging them for the yards of farms they had left behind to pursue an independent path. While this happens, their offspring drop out of school and have to cope with a horizon of poverty. In the bush, the discourse about ways to *get by* is promptly contradicted by solicitations for money, always for some sort of emergency. Accounts of an acceptable everyday life, based on the conjugation of occasional tasks made for someone, the preservation of leftover bananas and the income produced by

<sup>15</sup> Figures related to 1987, 1990, 1992 and 1994 – *O limiar da pobreza em STP*, UNDP, 1995, cit. in Bonfim, Feliciano (2001:22).

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.gm-unccd.org/FIELD/Bilaterals/Port/ST2.pdf>, consulted in August 2006.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.stome.com/fax1999>, consulted in August 2006.

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.who.int/countryfocus/cooperation\\_strategy/countries/ccs\\_stp\\_final\\_portuguese.pdf](http://www.who.int/countryfocus/cooperation_strategy/countries/ccs_stp_final_portuguese.pdf), consulted in August 2006. The HDR (Human Development Report) from 2002 indicates 54% and 15% of population living below the poverty line and in extreme poverty respectively, cf. *Relatório do Desenvolvimento Humano... 2002... 2002:28*.

<sup>19</sup> “Repórter” in *RTP África*, 23 de Novembro de 2005. In 2004, it was estimated that 54% of the Santomean population was living below the poverty line, an occurrence more accentuated in rural areas (cf. “Repórter” in *RTP África*, October 25<sup>th</sup> 2004). During the emission of March 24<sup>th</sup> 2005, it was mentioned the same percentage of individuals, 54%, living in poverty conditions.

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.who.int/countryfocus/cooperation\\_strategy/countries/ccs\\_stp\\_final\\_portuguese.pdf](http://www.who.int/countryfocus/cooperation_strategy/countries/ccs_stp_final_portuguese.pdf), consulted in August 2006. These are clearly estimated or idealized figures.

<sup>21</sup> This reality, visible to the naked eye, is admitted in several studies. It is expected that 65% of the rural population is living in a poverty situation and 22% in extreme poverty, cf. *Mesa redonda de infra-estruturas de energia*, October 30<sup>th</sup> 2006, cf. <http://www.anp-stp.gov.st/port/noticias/Infra-estruturas.pdf>, consulted in July 2009.

cacao, is transformed into requests demonstrating deprivation. Not necessarily posing as lies, such accounts are closer to what we could call an inspired life, predictable and without troubles... In these terms, it is licit to deduce that some deponents are not talking about their real lives, but about what they necessitate to survive.

Poverty is manifested in raggedy clothes and lack of personal hygiene amid the population, particularly the children, many of whom walk around barefooted<sup>22</sup>. This was extremely rare among the Sao Tomeans. In the same manner, it could be mentioned the act of asking for money. Or more significantly, a social environment positively marked by the degradation of the collective equipments, in addition to the cleanliness deficiency in public spaces.

Keeping in mind the social and political relevance and, more specifically, its repercussions to the fight against poverty, the matter turns out to be about how to determine the prospective for inverting attitudes that do not appease the atmosphere, instead denoting alienation and acrimony.

It is not unusual to see socially acknowledged persons, who provide services used by middle and high-class individuals and assume with heartfelt indignation the intention of punishing, with their own hands, any alleged thief. Such social tension is motivated by the mixture of difficulties and small criminality. Indeed, essentially because of the comparison with not so distant times, the welfare of the population seems menaced by a feeling of unsafety, prompted by a micro-violence patent in robberies, for instance.

The consequences are not merely of civic nature. The corrosion of social bonds has reached a point that makes difficult, if not impossible, to consider operating any idea for the communitarian development, without forgoing political leaders who underline that path, quoting examples of change in the social environment anchored in interventions performed in a few communities.

### **Perceptions of poverty**

The deprivation in Sao Tome and Principe appears to be perceived, more frequently than in other contexts, as material deprivation, more concretely financial deprivation, as an alternative to a more integrated perspective, consentaneous with the multifaceted approach presently adopted in relation to poverty and development.

Nevertheless, according to the Santomeans' self-representation, they are not poor, they are *average*. Poor is the one who is placed in a shelter. Poor is the one who, being alone, does not gather enough strength to get himself a plate of food. Poverty is associated to the incapacity to provide for survival and to physical debility, from which results the inability to defend against potential aggressions.

Very few describe themselves as poor, perhaps because such condition contests their personal self-esteem. However, complaints about the lack of money and daily hardships are commonly shared among most Santomeans. The appearance of merchandises for sale in stores after fifteen years of a *drought* of essential goods has only aggravated those complaints, equally caused by the inaccessibility to efficient healthcare and medicine services.

Poverty is distinguished from plain survival, which seems guaranteed, it is also distinguished from a more comprehensive outlook concerning the deprivation from

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<sup>22</sup> Bonfim, João (2000:75).

basic capacities, an unrelated item on account of the weak tradition for independent labor.

For the Santomeans, mostly those who want a secure future or who aspire for small gains, poverty tends to be restricted to a low income. Consequently, the predominance of this reductionist vision related to money is not surprising, considering that, except for cases of enrichment, the most elaborated perspective about poverty is still linked to an ideological bias. It is argued that the application of the PAE was a direct cause for the startling increase in absolute poverty, predominantly in urban areas where were built precarious dwellings, mostly with inadequate hygienic and sanitary conditions<sup>23</sup>. This politicized discourse plausibly discourages any mobilization against poverty.

Poverty does not stand solely for a lack of material resources. Likewise, it stands for a lack of power, equivalent to an inability to influence the structuration of social living conditions, which is particularly evident in the instance of the poorest populations<sup>24</sup>. In Sao Tome and Principe, this is pertinent at both national and regional levels. The poverty observed in Sao Tome and Principe is mirrored in the abdication of life, resulting from the belief that one is being left abandoned, a tributary notion relating both to the perception of impracticality for interfering in political and social arrangements, as to an attribution of liability to the leadership. In a manner, it is similar to poverty constituting an oxbow from which is tremendously hard to escape.

For a long time, the enclosure inherent to micro-insularity and the political and institutional circumstances have blocked the emergence of a social conscience about poverty. By imposition of an international agenda, in 2002 was elaborated the National Poverty Reduction Strategy. The goal was to reduce by half the percentage of population, 53.8%, living in poverty until 2010 and reduce it to less than one third by 2015. It was estimated that, by that time, the entire population would have access to basic social services, therefore achieving an improvement of living standards. The purpose is to reduce social and gender differences, in addition to asymmetries existing between districts and between islands. Among others, a pivotal aspect for this strategy is related to the reform of public institutions, the reinforcement of capacities and the promotion of good governance<sup>25</sup>. Nevertheless, to fight poverty it matters to change the deepest conditionalisms. From a resource stance, Sao Tome and Principe supposedly has conditions to combat the causes for poverty and to accomplish the MDG. However, it does not seem it will happen.

What is the worth of a sudden social and political conscience about poverty? Are there political and civic organizations capable of incorporating and diffusing a conscience in regard of the need to combat poverty and, more significantly, to highlight the conviction in the resolution of social issues? In spite of an institutional progress concerning social causes – an example is the creation of a Poverty Observatory – it is hard to mobilize on behalf of the fight against poverty, from which there is no way out without going beyond the induction of international aids. Despite the possibilities of promoting the eradication of poverty under misadjusted policies, these do not decline the congregation of efforts at the base. However, it seems the Sao Tomean society is not properly motivated for this task.

The corrosion of social relations standards is impeding the empowerment of individuals – or, more or less accurately, of “communities” – and the subsequent fight against

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<sup>23</sup> Santo, Armino (2008:77).

<sup>24</sup> About this subject, see Milando (2005:82).

<sup>25</sup> Rodrigues and Lopes (2007:19).

poverty. The State's delinquency and the failure of macro-economic regulations haven't helped to the emergence of projects for local development, which has no tradition in this country, because throughout the colonialism and the post-independence periods the State has been almost exclusively the pillar for economic administration and initiative. For that reason as well, the political tradition is to abide to strict and hierarchized relations, unsupportive of the decentralization and, therefore, to the delegation of power.

It appears quite straightforward to blame people from a determinate "community" for not taking care of a water supply ditch or for the degradation of some public equipment (conversely, it is not so simple to blame city residents for damages done to urban patrimony). In a sense, this degradation caused by social changes, paucity and deregulation of social bonds constitutes a form of violence – and is in itself an obstacle to human development – which afflicts those people in the first place.

Therefore, the roots for such conduct amid any "community" are induced by the absence of ethics and rigor in the political and administrative spheres that, beyond that, haven't filled the void caused by the transference of farms from Europeans owners to the Sao Tomean State and from the State to the hands of small landowners.

Since the most disadvantaged are witnessing the corrosion of the values by which they had been socialized and, above all, of the former social protection, it is created an impression of loss of identity, the notions of social equality and cohesion become derisory as rules for a fair social relationship, regardless or even beyond all economic distinctions. In the present economic and social circumstances, the popular dialogue about political evolution and corruption of the social accord does not indicate nothing more than a feeling of loss of control over one's future, and a propensity for dismay and renunciation of the future, at the most reduced to the attainment of daily sustenance.

On account of this, it is complicated to congregate the multiplicity of social actors committed in fighting poverty. It becomes easier to materialize actions of social support – which should preferably have a tangible materialization, even if limited to the distribution of soup – in the bush, in small *luchans* (villages) or in farmsteads. Small-scale actions of this sort are generally supported by outside funding. More importantly, as the result of the political and social background, these actions can not remark an ethical purpose for the social environment.

The institutional state of affairs affects the relevance given to "communities", without conditions for the emergence of leaders, as a result of the historical legacy, the atomization of social life in the recent past and, furthermore, the deteriorated influence of these resource-devoid "communities". Aware of this alienation from supervisory powers – an alienation that goes back to colonialism and has been prolonged throughout the post-independence phase – it is difficult to place people and communities as the focus of interest for development. There is, for example, no affordance of material resources to be managed by the communities, and consequently one of the conditions for the reduction of poverty is not being fulfilled, which is to have control over resources. Appropriated by politicians without any institutional safeguards, the notion of "community" is developing into a stereotypical cliché, a mere denomination made by an authority at once resigned from its social responsibilities and paternalist.

It is not afforded any power to the communities (as is not given effective powers to the peripheral administration), but the politicians demand these "communities", being several quite impoverished, to be responsive to the needs of the people and committed to the construction of a regulated social environment. Without forgetting the neighborly

solidarity, the transformation of numerous former farms' yards confirms how, in the absence of social regulation, such construction is in essence impracticable. Tactically, it is demanded from the communities to exercise a distinct dynamic – for instance, of economic engagement, settlement of national interests and conflict composition – and sometimes contrary to the experienced within the national political realm. It is required that these “communities” build a repository of solidarity values that defy the predatory judgment of the own Sao Tomean State and, perhaps, of the whole world.

In reality, several basic civic principles – belongingness and solidarity, for example – are required from “communities” scattered around the bush or from survivors of the farmyards who are missing from the political landscape, since the significance of recognizing a common identity, in this instance an African one, that gathered islanders and the *sons of the farms*, and the solidary mobilization for the resolution of collective issues has vanished with the reflux of the independence's political exaltation. The logical corollary is the segregation of these “communities”, whose members feel *abandoned*, since those who talk about the “communities” don't share their hardships or their real living conditions.

Instead of harboring more voluntarist and hopeful expectations for a transformation launched from bottom to top, it becomes quite hard to shape an implementation of the political power based on experiences of participative development, as scarce and shallow as they may be. The significance of these “communities” as a means of assessing local competencies would require a proper institutional environment, for instance for eventually establishing local leaderships. Once in awhile, the communitarian needs are partially safeguarded by an NGO, although these institutions may mitigate extreme poverty, nevertheless they cannot replace the (sought after) participation of the subjects.

The paternalistic stance is effectively maintained, after all. There isn't a change of perceptions in the way of allowing collective actions. In a manner, the appointment of Fradique de Menezes contained an indication of this collective demission in favor of someone with given proofs in the economic sector and, therefore, supposedly able to attract and distribute wealth. And given the instrumentalization of the elections by the *banho* phenomenon, it shouldn't be surprising if future presidential elections are characterized by a similar process of identification to a tutelary and economically gifted individuality. In such social surrounding, fighting poverty will become harder.

Apart from a lack of resources and instruments such as, for instance, associativeness, above all there are no adequate conditions to combat poverty. Among these, the commitment to applicable policies for fighting poverty – which does not produce immediate results, yet has to be perceived as conducing to this purpose – and, more decisively, the notion of political and moral involvement in a common destiny with the land and its population that, if ever achieved, would represent the largest barrier to the swelling of violence and of disagreements typically occurring in borderlands.

Thus, the devastation of society at the hands of poverty and micro-violence somehow marks the failure to settle equity during the stage of independence, inferred in the Sao Tomean's ethnic attachment and fellowship. The failure of this settlement for social equity and justice becomes more serious when applied to a micro-insular space where, according to its own political leaders, poverty should not be feasible.

## Disruption of social bonds

When related to politicians' *larcenies*, poverty turns into a factor for social strain, as well as explaining it and, in a way, validating it. At several levels, violence has started to infiltrate into the social accord.

Violence against the elderly is becoming widespread, a manifestation of the dissolution of family ties which used to be useful in the past (and to some extent, are still useful nowadays) as a social protection network. These days, poverty appears to be causing domestic abuse against senior citizens, then justified as beliefs in curses from acts of sorcery whose origin is attributed to them. Such abuse configures a denial of the alleged African values. Violence against seniors is a signal of the trajectory of social loss.

It is complicated to establish connections between family ties and child condition, a decisive feature while combating poverty. In some manner, the existence of *street children* was acknowledged years ago.

Currently, there are taking place behavioral transformations. Although so far children represent an insurance for the old age, it has become perceptible a change of the paradigm associated to maternity causing a decrease of the birth rate, *children are the future because after we get old (...) they come to take care of us, but it is no future to have so many and have nothing to give them*. Nonetheless, the children's situation, especially those from poor backgrounds, remains characterized by an elevated precariousness. For example, throughout the years, the government has led a campaign in favor of universal birth registration. In 2000, it was estimated that around 70% of children had been registered. It was usually disputed if the children were left out of registration for reasons of parental ignorance or unreliability. However, the deleterious effects of the disarticulation and ineptitude of the administration should also be reflected upon.

A portion of this precariousness comes from the deliquescence of family ties, as the result of a pervasiveness of polygamy and male unreliability. Such facts illustrate the enormous burden being placed upon women. Predictably, children living in mono-parental homes are particularly vulnerable to poverty.

In the poorest surroundings remains a notion of children as equivalent to richness, or, more prosaically, as family labor force. In effect, it is fairly usual to employ child labor. For example, many children trade in the streets in order to help out the family income. It is hard to believe this situation can be altered without the occurrence of economic changes and unless demanding goals are pursued for the social integration.

The political discourse focusing occasionally on behalf of the reposition of social controls and against violence does not articulate itself with the prevention of micro-violence. However, it has been growing lately a perception of domestic violence, including over children, as being a social issue which needs to be addressed<sup>26</sup>. Institutional conditions were actually implemented for the prevention of domestic violence, mostly gender-based, and for sheltering its victims. It was created a Counseling Center against Domestic Violence, which works in collaboration with the Justice Court, Attorney General Office, Criminal Investigation Force, National Police and Health Services, and by means of legislation dated from August 15<sup>th</sup> 2008 domestic violence has been qualified as crime. It was equally created a National Institute for the Promotion of Equality and Gender Parity. However, there are obvious difficulties in

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<sup>26</sup> For example, see Repórter *África* in RTP *África*, August 31th 2006.

dealing with social issues involving strong intimacy components and, at the same time, a (non-anonymous) confrontation with the surrounding society.

Besides, neither the Sao Tomean State nor those institutions engaged in the reconstruction of social bonds, more in particular family bonds, have the resources to take the economic burden that would result from a widespread protection of the victims of violence and, on the whole, the victims of social abandonment. Even so, at the most the situation will get a symbolic value, standing for behaviors which, while deep-rooted, are not longer tolerable.

In any case, the present political environment is not favorable to the civic commitment to fight poverty and oppose what is not necessarily called violence, may be characterized as an extensive erosion and rupture of social bonds. This occurrence becomes apparent when handling a hypothetical rural development, for which apparently all necessary requirements already exist. With no detriment to the defense of agriculture as the platform for national development, anchored in food self-sufficiency, the social environment is not encouraging for farming activities, which many say are a target for stealing<sup>27</sup>. In spite of the possibility of being an excuse for those who have no endurance to start again, there are frequent complaints about thefts' impunity, greatly damaging the efforts for reconstruction of the rural fabric to which, in fact, also lacks a sense of security regarding the access to agricultural property.

There is no acknowledgement of this increased violence as being the outcome of social and political leeway, which has supported the rise of the indetermination degree concerning the future and, in this manner; several subjects have departed from committing to anything other than their own survival.

### **Fighting for survival**

Besides fighting against poverty, for numerous years the Sao Tomeans have been fighting for survival. But without prospects, it must be said, since neither development nor economic integration can be comparable, for instance, to the multiplication of retail sale posts of cigarette packs along the streets.

There are noticeable changes in behavior (and values) that contribute to decreasing the most immediate and serious poverty occurrences. Forced to some extent by the unemployment, the number of individual enterprises has fairly increased, in search of better sources of personal income. Among the occasional occupations performed at the informal market are streets moneychangers, *palaiés* (street vendors) and laundresses (charging 25 thousand *Dobras*, approximately €1, for every basin of ironed laundry). For those working in stores and receiving wages, for instance, of 400,000 *Dobras*, their main concern is to get a daily meal, *I face hardships everyday, but we are used to it, today we have, tomorrow maybe not, that is the way we live... (laughter), but I've grown accustomed to my daily life*. This happens inside a context that instead of lessening the economic constraint has additionally posed various difficulties, derived from the imported inflation, that are forcing the boundaries of survival. Although having been in decline in these last years, the inflation is still a heavy burden, since a substantial portion of the meager wages is meant to provide for basic needs, mostly food.

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<sup>27</sup>While interpreted as a call or an incitement for the Santomean society, it was already made a public declaration about existing more people robbing the camps than cultivating them, cf. "Repórter" in *RTP África*, February 26<sup>th</sup> 2008.

For this reason, the capacity of creating saving is quite impressive, for instance, through the *chiquila*, formerly known as *kitembu*, a type of mutual loans funded by supplementary privation, allowing short-term completion of small projects or acquisition of durable goods. At a distinctive stage, the reduced economic and social diversity is limiting the possibilities to advance by way of instruments such as the microcredit. This will allow some people to escape poverty, but it is doubtful that will help in consolidating a myriad of ascending trajectories.

In spite of the small gains resulting from the use of opportunity niches, that have permitted some people to break away from poverty or, at least, to fulfill some basic needs, the popular perception is of being impossible to permanently eradicate poverty and inverse the escalating social differentiation. Even harder if being followed a path on the way to equality and social cohesion.

Any expectations about the future are shaped by the unemployment – a circumstance that has been lasting for decades, engendered by the farmers' choice to employ an imported labor force further vulnerable to labor exploitation, though during the last years of colonialism the unemployment did not seem to hold the same significance it holds nowadays – and by the *bicabala*, a daily struggle for survival under the law of *desenrascanço* (make do). The expectation for a more prosperous forthcoming economic condition is common ground to everyone. But it does not derive from having confidence in their own efforts, most of which restricted to sheer survival, nor from the country's trajectory. Their expectation results mostly from believing the situation cannot get any worse, while seemingly impossible to those who experience deprivation, is not necessarily accurate.

The generality of Sao Tomeans do hope for a better future, because they have no other alternative. Since the middle of the 90s decade they have waited for opportunities to lessen their poverty by means of the oil exploration, but beside the (controversial) uncertainties regarding this industry, there is a growing stance that they will not benefit from the petroleum extraction. So far, it simply allowed the involvement of the country in the crossroad of geo-strategic interests for this subregion.

Although there are no strict connections between the (imaginary and/or real) corruption and the efficiency of social policies, the progressive incompetence of the State in Sao Tome and Principe is causing much discouragement. After all, the State has been for decades the main promoter of social integration and welfare for the underprivileged, replacing most of all the familial structures and other networks supporting the integration which are only useful in more privileged circumstances. Therefore, any exclusion from public support is considered an extremely serious matter.

The signs transmitted by the political sphere to the society in relation to the pervasive logic for a one-off appropriation of resources and opportunities are having repercussions on the social anomy and unattainable solidarity. Inadvertently, they harbor a quiet conviction about the intricacy of finding solutions for the country.

The civic imperative in the eradication of poverty has been steadily reduced to a managerial, technocratic and instrumental purpose – the invocation to combat poverty seems to liberate from its execution – instead of turning into an ethical and moral mobilizing compromise. Therefore, it is plausible that poverty will persist beyond political purposes, particularly because the political and social pressures are quite diffuse and scarce as the outcome of having around half the population living in poverty situations. Perhaps the pressure from those who live in extreme poverty conditions will be less important than the pressure from those who, while not being in such



circumstances, do aspire, based on better assertive abilities, to benefit from the immediate allocation of resources, like those intended for project management, or profits from an imaginary or real petroleum trade.

The occurrences of deprivation and micro-violence have not yet unraveled the idealization of social peace in these islands. But they could hinder the social arrangement and the engagement to inflect the country and the society from a defeatist trajectory. Instead of blaming the confliction and consequent deprivations in the archipelago to external factors – wars, for example –, the reasons must be found in the *land*, in circumstances whose liability must be shared. This increases the dialogue's complexity. This way, despite the blame being placed on the politicians, it still remains to determine if the racialization or the interiorization of some of the responsibility made by common individuals does not indirectly restrain the belief and commitment to social change and poverty eradication.

In the absence of social strategies, or in spite of these, the answers will be found at a personal level and, in some measure, may involve migratory apprenticeships. The qualification of youths in foreign lands, the search for the institutionalization of a diaspora – regardless of unavoidable tensions with the homeland<sup>28</sup> – and the still incipient creation of a public space, all these may become factors for social change, overpowering the dynamic of loss and social disruption<sup>29</sup>.

### **Conclusive notes**

It is believed that human development and decreased poverty, on one hand, and economic growth, on the other, are mutually intertwined and reinforced. However, in this equatorial archipelago and not only here, this is more of a probability than an empirically corroborated fact. It must be kept in consideration that, in the future, some economic growth will come alongside a divide between the most privileged and the rest of the population. Though some economic indicators have registered a bit of progress and there are apparently more opportunities to build a life, it is uncertain that the poorest can get any inclusion into the development process.

Having been previously drained the affective and ideological impulses of the independence, there are not many instruments left for weaving the social cohesion, damaged by survival hardships and by the divergent trajectories of rulers and ruled.

Although it is also claimed that democracy promotes social and civic participation and, therefore, development, not only is that statement missing corroboration as nothing else indicates the possibility of a base movement being successful in demarcating the Sao Tomean society, especially the creation of social consensus that supply political and social references, without which the fight against poverty, then reduced to simple social engineering, would not be mobilizing. Lacking an alteration of political behaviors, in the sense of extensive trustworthiness in the decision-makers, it will be hard to put in practice any agreement to eliminate persistent poverty. In reality, in spite of the commonly accepted implication amid the poverty reduction, on one hand, and the predominance of democracy, on the other hand, the truth is that such implication has to be nuanced and not necessarily accurate. In spite of high standards regarding the civil and political rights, specifically with regard to freedom of the press, and the observance

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<sup>28</sup> Nascimento (2007a).

<sup>29</sup> Nascimento (2007b).

of institutional rules, concerning in particular the obedience to election results, the course of politics does not seem inspiring to the general Sao Tomean population. In a way, by contradicting the conviction ensuing from experiences conducted in other societies does not emerge a correlation between democratic participation – visibly feeble – and the possibilities for social emancipation and development. Actually, to take place such correlation it would be needed, among other requisites, an appropriate institutional procedure, besides a liable performance from the politicians.

The failure of the institutional performance has been threatening the social peace. Anyhow, by now it seems difficult to merge the political dispute with an eventual militancy in favor of the regeneration of customs in whole society. In reality, it is improbable that the political leaders are able to provide the indicators to establish social arrangements. If possible, it should be advanced gradually, particularly in the prevention of domestic violence and gender-based violence, since the fight against poverty will not appear mobilizing. So therefore, it would reveal itself unsystematic, inconsequential and, moreover, non-participated.

Occasionally, comes up the notion that a politically strong environment, engaged against the exploitation by the rich and powerful, could bring some benefits to the society. The tutelary and authoritarian solution, the *steady hand*, comes out as a panacea in times of increased unsafety, and in particular when the increase in criminality is quoted as a cause for poverty or as an aggression against the more vulnerable, namely in the *bush*. While the reversion of this dynamic of loss and exclusion associated to a rise of poverty is less reliant on police forces than on any ethical signal the political authorities are transmitting to society, the truth is many people would yearn for a return to stricter rules as a condition for constructing with their lives. Poverty did not generate violence, since the one it promotes has no origin in social deprivation. However, under the most diversified formats, violence risks perpetuating poverty.

Besides huge and radical changes, especially since 1990, Sao Tome and Principe has distanced itself from the forecasted and preferred goal instituted in 1975. Since then, the economic and social evolution has been revealing to be tenaciously adverse to the independentist promises. Along with the concentration of wealth, poverty seems firmly anchored in these islands. There is a high number of unemployed, the population earns low wages and, in general, the economic performance is just bearable. Undeniably, such situation has historical roots, however at this distance from the end of colonialism, it mostly demonstrates a voluntarist, erratic and in some way ruinous political conduction, less due to economic records than to an erosion of ethics and social liability, crucial elements for a renewed political and social mobilization and for the future of the country.

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