

PROJECTO OCEANO – MARCH 2012 REPORT



It seems strange to write this, my last blog entry for AZLera, sitting in Starbucks with a cappuccino in a shopping mall in South Africa. It has been a hectic past 10 days, with an emotional departure from Projecto Oceano on Ilha de Moçambique, 3 days and nights spent hitchhiking in a lorry south to Maputo, and finally getting a long bus through Swaziland to meet my family in Durban. As strenuous as the journey has been (and believe me, it has!), it has provided many moments to reflect on the past year, both from a personal perspective and from the perspective of the developments made at Projecto Oceano.

For myself, I will forever look back on the past 12 months as a highlight of my personal and professional life. Back in March 2011, I arrived in Mozambique with little knowledge of Portuguese, no Mozambican friends, armed with ambitions for our little Project but unsure of exactly how I was to make them a reality. A year on, and I can look back at a year of new friendships, linguistic boundaries broken, successful successes and frustrating frustrations; a series of events over 365 days that are impossible to sum up adequately in a few words. The only clichéd phrase which threatens to come close is 'a life experience'. "Eeeeeepa", as Zito or Freddie might say, "é *maningue* difícil explicar isto"!!

Before looking at the progress that the Project has made in the past year...a quick summary of March's events on Ilha. It has been a strange year so far, with the departure of over half of our founding students. The challenge for me and the remaining Project teachers has been to find ambitious young replacements for our departed members; we have been combing Ilha for people who are young enough to be able to commit to the Project for at least 2 years, but who are mature enough to take on responsibility for running our various activities (i.e. 15 / 16 years old). We have been searching for students who combine strong academics with a creative attitude and a proactive approach to getting involved in extra-curricular activities, and who have the potential to be candidates for our university scholarships. After advertising positions in *Voz Jovem*, our student newsletter, we had a number of applicants and ran some informal interviews in the Project. With the departure of Firoza in January, we were conscious of the need to get a strong female presence in the Project to avoid Jessica Barratt, our new Project Manager, arriving to find the Projecto Oceano a hotbed of machismo, male egos, and dirty jokes! Luckily enough, our 3 outstanding candidates were all girls

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who, after a month of probation, have now been awarded contracts and 'responsibility areas'. Naiza will take charge of Social Debates, Mami will teach Level 2 I.T. classes, and Levelinha, a particularly promising student, will become editor for Voz Jovem.

Reflecting on the past year for AZLera, we have made huge strides in some very important areas. From my first day with Projecto Oceano in Mozambique, Freddie Brunt, Wilbert Sanchez and myself have worked very hard to create strong management processes, including improved monthly reporting of expenses, Project activities, publicity and communication. On Ilha, two fantastic building renovation exercises have been conducted over the past 12 months in order to give us a professional space where students are in a position to excel, both in terms of the building they work in and the materials at their disposal. We have reflected our managerial professionalism on the ground, with a solid timetable to regulate our weekly classes, tying our top students into contracts with the Project, and ensuring that the classes we offer are aligned to what Mozambican students need to progress to further education or jobs.

We have expanded our curriculums to include language classes, I.T. courses, current affairs classes, CV / employment classes, journalism classes and extra-curricular activities and sports tournaments. Whilst we are happy with our current educational offering, AZLera will continue to consult education experts to further improve and refine our courses. We think that it is critical that **critical thinking** plays a crucial role in all that we teach at Projecto Oceano, and will continue to find ways to include this vital skill in our classes. We want students who have the confidence to challenge the status quo and look for solutions to all problems. This will serve them well both in life and work, and will be crucial to the continued development of Mozambique.

During the tenures of Freddie, Max and Margarida, a number of promising students from the same age group were invited into the Project. As a regular reader of this blog (which I hope you are!), you will have seen the names of these 7 students crop up over the past year on the website: Tino, Zito, Firoza, Mingos, Jaime, Coman and Gito. This group of students left school in November 2011, with our encouragements to apply for university. On an island where the large majority of 12th grade students fail their exams, we were very proud to see 4 out of these 7 Project students pass the admission tests and gain entrance into university for a variety of courses, including Agronomy, I.T. Engineering, Nutrition, and Teaching. It shows us that Projecto Oceano's succeeds in selecting the most promising students from our local communities; it is now our collective responsibility to help these students realise their ambitions through our scholarship system.

During my time at Projecto Oceano I have tried to concentrate on the most promising students, working roughly on the old Chinese mantra 'a teacher can open the door, but the student must walk through it'. I have not forced unwilling or unenthusiastic students to study; rather I have looked to push those who show us some potential and enthusiasm. Freddie, Max, Margarida and myself have opened doors for Projecto Oceano's main students over the past 5 years, and we are very happy to see them walking through these doors into university. However, we will not rest upon our laurels; we want to open further doors through our university scholarships. We know that if we push ourselves, we can open doors to the best university courses in Maputo, fantastic degrees, and great jobs for a group of students we care deeply about.

AZLera's scholarships will pay for 2 Project students to study at university in Maputo from 2013. Our selection process is highly competitive, and will take into account applicants' skills, potential, and ambitions. We are currently refining the scholarship process, and choosing a range of courses that are important to Mozambique's emergence as a developed country: Medicine, Civil and I.T. Engineering, Architecture, and Teaching to name a few. For more information on our scholarship system, please see the relevant page on www.azlera.org. We guarantee that any funds donated to the scholarships will be reserved for scholarships and scholarships alone: AZLera covers all management and volunteer costs privately. If you are interested in playing a part in our students' lives, please look at our Student Profiles and Scholarship pages on the website. We believe that we

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offer quite a unique model of sponsoring a student through university: we (and hopefully you, through reading these blogs) know our students extremely well, and we guarantee that donated money will be spent well. We are a very small NGO with negligible management costs; bureaucracy does not come into what we do. Contact any AZLera team member directly for more information.

On a personal note, I find myself profoundly sad to have left Ilha de Moçambique and my life there. After a year living there as an important part of a small community, it feels like leaving family, and the wrench of leaving is still very real. The old cliché about ‘people making a place special’ is true of Ilha as well; the only difference is that the place is equally special on Ilha too! To have lived in a UNESCO World Heritage Site for a year, in the middle of the Indian Ocean and surrounded by crumbling colonial palaces has been a huge privilege, surrounded by Mozambicans who welcomed me into their homes and made my time there unforgettable. The kindness I found on Ilha de Moçambique has had a profound effect on me; in comparison, you Westerners are a cold bunch after all! Despite the malaria, glandular fever, frequent sunburn and utterly forgettable *chapa* rides to Nampula (!), I would not swap my experience for all the tea in Gurué. Indeed, I may well be the first person to apply for Projecto Oceano’s ‘on-ground’ management position in 2013 – Freddie, I expect preferential treatment!! Latched onto the edge of a continent that is desperately searching for success, development, security and its own identity, Ilha de Moçambique is a unique corner of Africa which can definitely achieve these things. I urge you to visit that beautiful island, and to put aside an afternoon to visit Projecto Oceano.

With my last few words, I would like to wish Projecto Oceano’s new manager on Ilha, Jessica Barratt, the very best of luck. She is already on Ilha and getting to grips with our ever-improving and ever-expanding Project; if you are passing through the Moz, get in touch with her! With a background in social enterprise and development work in the UK, Jessica will undoubtedly add a huge amount to Projecto Oceano over the next 9 – 12 months. To Jessica – *boa sorte!* To Freddie and Wilbert, it has been a genuine pleasure to work with you both. To all on Ilha, *abracos do menino ingles, e ‘vacamelo’ pela ultima vez...*