

## **SDG 1: No Poverty**

### **Covid & Droughts: Can Madagascar break the cycle of poverty?**

Jaysim Hanspal (Oct. 29, 2021)

*Considered to be one of the poorest countries in the world, Madagascar has been hit hard by both the pandemic and from several droughts.*

75% of Malagasy people live on less than two dollars a day. The pandemic triggered a deep recession in the country, with the World Bank predicting this has tipped 100 million people into extreme poverty.

Slums in the country prevent the possibility of social distancing, and so the virus has been able to spread rapidly in the poorest communities on the island. Climate change has turned fertile plots into dust, and small families who rely on their land are no longer able to survive.

### **Droughts across the board**

The south has been significantly affected, with the fourth year of droughts leaving many severe cases of malnutrition. UNICEF has estimated that there are 110,000 severely malnourished children in the south of the country – 45% of children. The acutely malnourished, the second low malnourished score, is expected to rise to a billion within the next year.

*As a result, many children suffer from stunting, which affects children's physical and mental development. "We are in a crisis situation at the moment, Madagascar is a donor orphan country you could say – it is often overlooked,"* says Timothy Irwin from UNICEF.

Rising prices, as elsewhere, has meant that resources coming to the island have been incredibly limited, and they do not have production rates to sustain the population.

### **Education on hold**

While many countries in the West managed with online education, most students in Madagascar have not had access to education. "The national closure of schools was a minimum of six months, and there are no official statistics to prove the literacy rate has gone down. So children often assist their parents, trying to earn as much money as possible", says Nathan Stapley, director of Learn Achieve Become (L.A.B), who witnessed first-hand these difficulties.

*It is estimated that only 35% of children in Madagascar complete their primary education. In the majority of cases, this is due to schooling fees being too expensive. Stapley worries particularly about the rural areas, where he knows students were already sharing pens and paper.*

"We've struggled with getting international boots on the ground, and as a not-for-profit, we've not been able to go forward with many of our projects," he says. L.A.B has been building what will be known as the 'Sunrise Centre': the first centre for disabilities on the island, providing education, leisure and employment opportunities

in conjunction with the Madagascar Research & Conservation Institute. But due to the pandemic, the centre and the community that relies on it, have been delayed by a year.

### **Tourism cut-off**

Given the country has remained closed off to foreigners, its tourism industry has come to a grinding halt. “The long chain of people who may be earning their income from tourism is affected, but also the supply chains are impacted,” says Irwin.

Rado Tiana Barioelina, a guide from Antananarivo, says his business suffered due to the ongoing travel restrictions. “The pandemic is almost over, but economically *we are still well-affected*,” he adds.

Juvence Ramasy, a political science lecturer at the University of Toamasina, thinks that as many African countries, it will be hard for Madagascar to go back to the same levels of growth before the pandemic.

“The impact on tourism is a big worry. Now the borders have been open since the 23rd of October, so we’ll see how things go. The president hasn’t pushed for vaccinations against Covid-19, so that could push certain groups of the population to not get vaccinated. I’m not sure European tourists will want to come.”

### **All is not lost**

UNICEF has introduced a cash transfer programme that gives families €20-25 a month, given to the mother to use how they see fit. It can be used to buy food, start a small business, or fund children’s education.

But according to Justine Lungu, a representative from SOS children’s villages, the scheme is not *as effective as one might think*. “It doesn’t reach everyone, it’s an insignificant number of people who are getting it. Millions of people need that support, who are trapped in poverty.”

Ramasy adds: “The aid that the state has given isn’t sufficient, and many people are part of the informal economy and have lost their purchasing power. International aid has been infrequent, and the state can’t help people indefinitely.”

Although only 2% of the population is vaccinated, Madagascar has been experiencing a lower rate of Covid-19, after a spike in April. Lungu adds that the pandemic has inspired many people to open up their own businesses, despite the government lockdown.

“It is teaching the government, communities, and families to do things in a different way. People have realised that *you cannot just wait, you have to do something different*.” In this sense, the pandemic has required an uptake in mobile payments due to social distancing, improvements to Madagascar’s infrastructure, which will last far beyond the pandemic.

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<https://www.theafricareport.com/135577/covid-droughts-can-madagascar-break-the-cycle-of-poverty/> (accessed November 10, 2021).