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Madagascar, Factor 13: Demographics

Madagascar: It's Not as Fun as the Movie

When young people in the United States think of Madagascar, most of them think of the 2005 Dreamworks Animation movie--the one with the funny talking animals--and its several sequels. From the movie most people would assume that Madagascar is a happy tropical place. Unfortunately, they would assume wrong. Madagascar is actually dealing with a lot of problems socially, politically, but also agriculturally. Madagascar's large proportion of population is under the global poverty line, and people are having to survive on less financial resources than the rest of the world.

In order to understand Madagascar, let's look at its geography. Madagascar is an island in Southern Africa in the Indian Ocean. It is located east of Mozambique ("Africa: Madagascar"). Madagascar is not as big as it seems; it is not quite double the size of Arizona. With this in mind, Madagascar is ranked 47th in the world size-wise ("Africa: Madagascar"). Madagascar has multiple different climates depending on where you are. Madagascar is very tropical along the coast, temperate on the inland, and very arid in the south. The high temperature climate limits what can be grown, but that does not stop the people from using 71.1% of the land for agriculture ("Africa: Madagascar").

When you live in the United States you are an American, but when you live in Madagascar, you are called a Malagasy (even when it is plural). Malagasy people can expect to live just over 55 years, and "84 out of every 1,000 children will die before the age of 5" ("Rural Poverty in Madagascar"). In comparison, I come from a high school of around 400 students, 100 being in my grade. This would mean that I would be graduating with 8 less of my classmates. The kids in Madagascar are dying because of lack of hygiene, chronic malnutrition and the lack of access to drinking water ("Rural Poverty in Madagascar"). For drinking water, the poor people of the communities are more likely to rely exclusively on sources such as lakes, ponds, and rivers. These sources of contaminated water are leading to infectious diseases such as respiratory ailments, tuberculosis and hepatitis. Most Malagasy's live over 5 kilometers (3.1 miles) to the nearest hospital, so they would not have easy access to health care. The more wealthy people of Madagascar have the access to the wells, public taps, and indoor plumbing. While these kids are dying in Madagascar, majority of us, American teenagers, are thinking about how we are going to do our hair for prom.

Recent political problems in Madagascar also contributed to declining quality of life. The "High Transition Authority" was formed in 2009 following the overthrowing of the past government, and no mediation has worked ever since, so the international community subjected Madagascar to economic sanctions ("Madagascar's Hungry Population"). "The decision to suspend Madagascar from the African Growth and Opportunities Act by the United States has cost at least 50,000 jobs in the textile sector, which had accounted for half of Madagascar's exports," and the European Union is also working on sanctions of about 600 million euros, which may soon result in "adding Madagascar to the list of fragile States" (Olivier De Schutter qtd in "Madagascar's Hungry Population"). De Schutter warns against a "humanitarian catastrophe for [Madagascar's] population" and decries the loss of "high performance ecological agriculture and land reform aimed at securing access to land for the population."

National Institute of Statistics published its recent data where “68.7 per cent of the island's inhabitants live below the poverty threshold, with the overwhelming majority of these (85 per cent) living in rural areas, while per capita GNP was a bare US\$266 in 2004” (“Rural Poverty in Madagascar”).

According to Olivier De Schutter, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right of food, “...one in two inhabitants [of Madagascar] is food insecure” and this number rises to 68% in the South of the country (qtd in “Madagascar’s Hungry Population is Taken Hostage”). As a result, “Madagascar today has one of the highest levels of child malnutrition in the world, with levels comparable to those of Afghanistan or Yemen,” De Schutter concluded.

The people are what really make the country what it is; in Madagascar there are roughly 10 different ethnic cultures that are present. Then within those 10 ethnic groups there are 3 main different languages spoken, 3 main religions practiced, and around 23,812,681 people (“Africa: Madagascar”). With that many people come a responsibility to take care of your country. The people can only do so much, in rural areas in Madagascar there is only an 8.7% improvement rate on the sanitation facility access (“Africa: Madagascar”). Without this number drastically improving more and more malagasy are going to keep getting sick. In Madagascar there are around 39,100 people living with either HIV or AIDS, and there are 3,200 deaths caused by HIV/AIDS.

When young women in America have a baby at 19, American people automatically think that they are too young. In all reality, is that really too young? Malagasy women are on average 19.4 when they have their first child (“Africa: Madagascar”). The average American women will have 1.87 children, in their lives. Meanwhile on the other side of the world, Malagasy women are averaging 4.2 children (“Africa: Madagascar”). Many people may be asking themselves: If they are all below the poverty line, why are they reproducing so much? That is an honest and fair question because kids do not come free. The more children you have, the more workers you have. Once they are old enough they can start working and bring in more money for the family. Madagascar’s youth (15-24 years old) unemployment rate is 2.6% (“Africa: Madagascar”). Instead of going to school, these kids are having to work.

As much as most teenagers complain about going to school, some countries are lucky if they get to attend. On average, an American will get to go to school for 16 or 17 years, while the average Malagasy will only get to attend for 10 or 11 years. While most American teens are reading “*To Kill A Mockingbird*,” only 64.7% of malagasy are literate. When it comes to education expenditures Madagascar is ranked 150th in the world, coming in at 2.7% GDP (“Africa: Madagascar”). Education is key to providing agriculturally based facts to a society, especially one in food crisis. In the U.S. we are lucky enough to receive many agriculture classes. In Madagascar, they are lucky if they get to make it to around 8th grade, let alone get as many diverse classes as us. We Americans often do not realize how lucky we are to not only attend school, but get to pick our own classes. Without my middle school Ag class, I would not be writing this paper, and I would have never become the North Central FFA Reporter, and I probably would not have the opportunity to apply for the Iowa Youth Institute and learn so much about Madagascar..

Now taking it back to the geography, 71.1% of land is used for agricultural purposes. Madagascar is not only good for serving as an inspiration for movies; their climate allows them to grow multiple crops on the large scale side such as: sisal, sugarcane, tobacco, bananas, and cotton (“Africa: Madagascar”). The smaller privately owned farms are also a big contributor. Many smaller farms produce many other crops like rice, cassava, bananas, and sweet potatoes, coffee, natural vanilla extract, and cloves (“Africa:

Madagascar”). Believe it or not, Madagascar is the world’s number 1 producer in natural vanilla: They produce 75% of the world's vanilla (“Madagascar - Agriculture”). Even though 71.1% of the land is used for agricultural purposes, much of the land is unsuitable for cultivation because of its mountainous terrain, extensive lateralization, and inadequate or irregular rainfall. Only about 5% of the land area is cultivated at any one time (“Madagascar - Agriculture”).

With all of these different crops, there has to be a way to distribute the goods to the world. Madagascar has 57 unpaved airport runways and 26 with paved runways (“Madagascar - Agriculture”). Hauling 75% of the world's vanilla cannot just be transported by airplanes. Madagascar also has 519.47 miles of railroad throughout the entire country (“Madagascar - Agriculture”). They also have 23,286.51 miles of roadway, but only 3,792.23 of those miles are paved (“Madagascar - Agriculture”). Without paved roads, the Malagasy are limited to how and where they can take their goods.

Even though Madagascar is producing all of these different crops and nutrients, the people are severely lacking in the nutrition department. The poorer communities in Madagascar are not consuming a sufficient amount of calories (“Madagascar: Poverty Assessment”). The foods that they can afford and do consume are not the highest of qualities. Many of the foods that they do consume have very little to no nutritional value (“Madagascar: Poverty Assessment”). The children of these less fortunate communities are ultimately the ones suffering. Children living in poor households generally have higher rates of malnutrition than those living in the wealthier households (“Madagascar: Poverty Assessment”).

Now that we have some background, let's get down to the issue at hand. As mentioned earlier, most of Madagascar’s population is under the poverty line. Madagascar is one of the poorest countries in the world, and poverty has only been increasing and deepening over the last two and a half decades with the real per capita income having decreased by 40 percent between 1971 and 1991:

70 percent of the population can be defined as being poor and 59 percent as being extremely poor. Almost 80 percent of the rural population are poor compared with almost 50 percent of the urban population. Two-thirds (66 percent) of the rural population are extremely poor compared with just above a third (35 percent) of the urban population. As a result, 86 percent of the poor and 88 percent of the extremely poor live in rural areas. Poverty is also deeper in rural areas than in urban areas. (“Madagascar: Poverty Assessment”)

The unusual thing is that the farmers are the poorest of everyone (“Madagascar: Poverty Assessment”). The people working long hard days, trying to feed everyone, who are trying to keep their families alive are the ones who are getting paid the least.

Madagascar has an outstanding potential for growth in the country, a well-trained labor force, and an abundance of natural resources. Natural resources are what countries can rely on, and Madagascar has many. Madagascar’s natural resources consist of graphite, chromite, coal, bauxite, rare earth elements, salt, quartz, tar sands, semiprecious stones, mica, fish, and hydropower (“Africa: Madagascar”). Madagascar’s advantage in labor costs makes it a very attractive place for investment in goods that are very labor-intensive to produce. If more people start seeing this, they could start building more production around the area. This would then create many higher paying jobs for the Malagasy, giving them more money to buy the foods they need, and not just the food they can afford.

There is also a potential for increasing the production of traditional food and export crops and high-valued agricultural export crops such as tropical fruits, essential oils, and shrimp (“Madagascar: Poverty Assessment”). These exports are only found in the right climates making them more expensive and giving them the label of a “high-valued agricultural export.” The country also has sizable mineral resources that have not yet been explored (“Madagascar: Poverty Assessment”). We need to send in people and discover the amazing opportunities that are right underneath our noses. Madagascar has a huge ecological diversity and a lot of unspoiled, untouched beaches, so it has enormous tourist potential, which would also bring in money. Tourism money would be going to the locals of Madagascar, not just the government.

It is now clear that Madagascar’s government needs to focus on improving the living standards in all parts of Madagascar in order to reduce poverty. The government cannot just make money and start handing it out like candy. What they can do is let the world know of Madagascar's hidden treasures. If that means there export prices go up, so be it. If their export prices go up, the government can start distributing that hard earned money to the farmers who worked for the money. The money that the government keeps can go towards the healthcare system. With this excess money Madagascar could become the beautiful country everyone believes it to be.

Our number one problem in the world is that we do not realize what we have until it is gone. There are so many unused resources all over the globe and we are too focused on one thing that we do not even notice the potential of other countries. Next time you hear of Madagascar, don’t think of the movie, think about the people of the country. While you’re eating a five-course Italian feast for supper, children in Madagascar aren’t even getting the appropriate amount of nutrients to stay alive.

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