



Madagascar: where inflation, climate change and cyclones collide

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In this study of the impact of climate change on the people of Madagascar NY HASINA ANDRIANTSEHENOMAMONJY explains how the climatic conditions that have severely affected countries in the region have dramatically impoverished the rice farming Malagasy, driving them into debt traps which unscrupulous money lenders and avaricious property developers have taken full advantage of. Below, she proposes possible solutions to the country's key economic and climate challenges.

Introduction

Madagascar is an island country in the Indian Ocean, approximately 400km off the coast of East Africa across the Mozambique Channel. At 592,000 square kilometers, it is the world's largest island after Indonesia.

Although it is one of the five poorest countries in the world, Madagascar is ranked among the world's top tourist destinations due to its unique indigenous fauna and lush flora. With its cosmopolitan growing population that has its origins in Africa, Asia and Europe, the island's cultural richness often surprises visitors. Recently, the "Madagascar" movie franchise introduced the island to millions of new "fans" around the world.

Unfortunately, Madagascar and Lemur Island off its coast have been facing a multitude of challenges in recent years (inflation, stagnation, climate change effects, etc.) leading to social, economic and cultural upheavals such as famine and forced migration. Madagascar is reportedly among the countries most affected by climate change and rising ocean levels. ➤



This calls for urgent adaptation, mitigation and socioecological transformation.

Madagascar has been the scene of countless natural disasters, especially cyclones and tropical storms, due to its geographic location. In fact, the island is hit by hundreds of cyclones and tropical storms every year, although most are harmless.

Recently, however, the cyclones have been getting bigger, faster and more dangerous. Cyclone Freddy hit Madagascar in February 2023, killing seven people. It left a trail of destruction as it travelled along a very unusual curved path across Asia, Oceania and finally landing in Africa in a record 36 days. The Malagasy National Office for Risk and Disaster Management reported that more than 100,000 people were affected by Cyclone Freddy. School infrastructure was the worst affected and thousands of students are still without schools.

Several settlements are still under water in the Atsimo Andrefana (south-west) and Menabe (west coast) regions: in those areas, the Risk and Disaster Management Office reported 414 flooded properties and 2,863 people affected from 689 households. A total of 1,939 people were displaced in Manja district (in the south) and 362 in the sites of Toliara and Morombe (in the south-west of the island).

Cyclone Freddy came on the back of the violent and destructive Tropical Storm Ana and Cyclone Batsirai and Cyclone Kenneth in 2022. According to the United Nations, in early 2022 Tropical Storm Ana killed 55 people and affected 132,000. Shortly after that, Cyclone Batsirai claimed 120 lives, displaced 120,000 people and affected another 500,000 people and properties. During 2019, Madagascar was hit hard by Cyclone Idai and Cyclone Kenneth.

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In the southern semi-arid and arid parts of Madagascar, otherwise known as the “Deep South,” communities have been experiencing recurrent catastrophic starvation or “*Kere*” (as it is called in the local dialect) for decades. Demographic pressures and worsening drought due to climate change are the main causes of this ongoing crisis which traps the subregion in a cycle of poverty: 57% of the population are classified very poor (INSTAT, 2014) while 67,5% experience continuous undernourishment (Razanakoto, 2017).

To escape the food shortage and economic distress, Malagasy from *Kere*-affected communities are migrating northwards. This mass migration means that more food and other resources are needed: land, houses, hospitals, schools, etc.

Conflict is almost inevitable as migrants are not readily welcomed by local populations who are also struggling. Although northern Madagascar looks quite different from the south, climate challenges also exist, in the form of flooding in some parts and drought in others, with devastating consequences for humans and the wildlife in general.

Inflation and the cost of living has worsened in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and since the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic Madagascar, already weakened by many factors, has experienced unprecedented inflation, especially in the prices of basic necessities.

Our research among suburban small-scale rice and vegetable producers in the context of the Covid pandemic, the war in Ukraine and climate change clearly showed that like many other African countries, the Malagasy people of Madagascar are also going through a tough time.

The cost of most food items has gone up. Like everywhere else on the African continent, the purchase price of cooking oil, wheat flour, rice and other basic, everyday staples that people need to survive have skyrocketed. The cost of building materials and pharmaceuticals has also doubled or tripled in some cases.

Small-scale farmers are taking longer to sell their fresh produce. Some have resorted to strategies like selling reduced portions at the price their customers paid several years ago.

Inflation is increasing the number of new poor, both in urban and rural areas, and further widening the gap between the haves and have-nots. Families are cutting back on the number of meals they eat to get by. Some people are even selling their property to buy food. Employment opportunities are few and far between because the Malagasy economy is not growing fast enough to create new opportunities for the majority of citizens. Fewer than 10% of the 29 million Malagasy report that they are doing well.

Most Malagasy earn their living off the land through agriculture and artisanal mining. >>



The biggest group affected are those working in agriculture, especially small-scale farmers and vegetable producers since the agricultural calendar and crops seasons have become so unpredictable.

“In all our lives, we never had difficulties like today with changes we have not been prepared for that make the land more arid and temperamental, resulting in huge loss of income,” said a woman who declined to give her name. “Our yields are getting smaller and smaller and we cannot afford modern tools because they are too expensive. We also cannot find adaptive and resilient seeds. In addition, we are struggling with access to water and inputs.”

The price of rice has recently soared to nearly five times its previous price, making this basic foodstuff almost a luxury. This is untenable in a country where rice is the primary food crop.

Climate change and the growing demand for dwindling rice harvests has become a major issue for the thousands of rice farmers across the island, from north to south, east to west as well as in the central highlands. People have witnessed a constant decline in yields from year to year, resulting in shortages within their own households.

“Times have been getting tougher over the last 10 years. Our work does not even allow us to feed ourselves properly throughout the year. How do you expect us to live on an empty stomach? We could do better if the state helped us a little because we lack everything here: more land to cultivate, water, seeds and especially money!”



The Vary Maitso borrowing system

Poorer Malagasy families face an even bigger battle to find food during the lean period from October to December, when rice farmers are busy in the rice fields planting, transplanting, weeding and so on before the harvest. This requires intensive labour and a lot of cash. Because they do not have the financial means to feed themselves and buy inputs at the same time, many small-scale producers are forced to borrow cash or food from private individuals in usurious informal credit systems that have existed in the country for decades. Sometimes, farmers become heavily indebted (due to their loans, interest repayments, etc.) and become trapped in the debt system.

To escape this, they may have to pawn or sell their crop while it is still green rice plants growing in the paddies — at ridiculously low prices imposed by their creditors. This is known as the “Vary Maitso” system.

Vary Maitso literally means “green rice,” i.e. rice plants that are still growing. For the thousands of small-scale producers across Madagascar their most valuable possession is their land and the rice that they produce on their land.

Due to climate change, economic hardship and other factors, rice harvests have been declining. The rice acreage is also shrinking, so that many families cannot harvest enough to feed themselves until the next harvest.

What can a cash-strapped farmer who cannot borrow money from a regular financial institution do to get out of this situation? They usually go to their neighbours, moneylenders (loan sharks actually) and offer them part of their rice crop that is still growing, the green rice – *Vary Maitso* – in exchange for rice they can eat right away. Alternatively they say, “give me some money to buy rice from the market and I will pay you back later. When my rice is ready, I will harvest it and give you the portion that I took from you, in rice or in money – as you prefer.”

This system used to serve as a solidarity mechanism for neighbours to help each other and bind the community. However, it has now been corrupted by predators who want to make profits or get their hands on prime land on which they can build high-end apartment buildings in cities like the capital Antananarivo that are fast running out of space.

If farmers’ meagre harvests do not allow them to honour their debts, some unscrupulous creditors do not hesitate to confiscate their farms.

Land grabs have grown over the years without the state taking any action to stop it. The debt scourge that affects almost the majority of the country’s farmers is getting worse. Even more concerning is the fact that the system of *Vary Maitso* has become so corrupted that corporate national and foreign investors have started offering loan products to get their dirty hands on poor people’s land.

The government needs to act quickly to end this corruption. If left unchecked, this could lead to the displacement of many vulnerable farmers and possibly create mass social unrest.

The government itself recently tried to seize some land around the suburbs of Antananarivo to build a new capital but their efforts were thwarted by campaigns by civil society and community activists. >>



It is time to build climate-smart cities

No concrete mitigation strategies have been rolled out in Madagascar to address climate change-related consequences. The fate of the poor and vulnerable has been left to chance. It is time for this to change.

In 2021, the famine in southern Madagascar was identified as the first famine in the world induced by climate change. Rising ocean heat in the Indian Ocean means that Madagascar as well as mainland countries like Mozambique, Malawi and even South Africa are going to have to contend with more damaging storms, floods and rainfall in the coming years.

Faced with this reality, Madagascar has to start building climate-smart cities fast. It has to invest money in adaptation and mitigation. However, it cannot do that alone; the countries that are most responsible for climate change have to step in and work with Madagascar to roll out key infrastructure.

Madagascar is in urgent need of climate-smart infrastructure. The country has to build more houses, roads, bridges and telecommunication systems that are resistant to intense storms. It also needs to build dams and catchment areas to mitigate the effects of drought.

Farmers need help urgently. The country needs to develop evacuation systems adapted to each region to mitigate the effects of floods. To improve production, extension officers are needed to develop farmer-managed seed systems operated through cooperatives. Farmers should be supported to get more grain for planting. If possible – and why not – some could be incentivised to grow more for the local Malagasy and African markets. However, Madagascar lacks the logistics and infrastructure to export food to other African countries, its closest potential market.

The priority is to provide finance and infrastructure to help Malagasy grow enough rice to meet their needs now. The lack or absence of infrastructure is a barrier to better rice production and even food self-sufficiency.

Regrettably too, no clear policy has been put in place to mitigate the impacts of inflation in the context of the current war between Russia and Ukraine. Instead of providing emergency aid interventions, including distribution of imported rice that does not match the local context and undermines the human dignity of the inhabitants, sustainable initiatives must be implemented urgently.

The government could for example promote local food production by granting solidarity funds and establishing guaranteed purchase schemes. It could also strengthen and equip local markets to build stronger circular economies based on cyclical production and consumption processes such as recycling, reusing, refurbishing, sharing, leasing and repairing materials and products for as long as possible. In that way the economy could be transformed so that none are left behind.

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