

Nourishing the Land, Nourishing the People: A Madagascar Success Story

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Nourishing the Land, Nourishing the People: A Madagascar Success Story

By Brett Shapiro, Assefa Woldeyes,
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At first glance, “*Nourishing the Land, Nourishing the People*” promises much, carrying the subtitle “*A Madagascar Success Story*.” The book reports on an ambitious International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) project in the Upper Mandrare River Basin in southeastern Madagascar. This is a bold initiative, dealing not only with irrigation and agriculture but also with wider issues such as livestock rearing, adult literacy, microcredit, and finance. Having visited this arid region and spent the last 10 years researching agricultural livelihoods in a similarly challenging dryland environment in western Madagascar, I appreciate the difficulties faced by both farmers and the organizations trying to help them.

The authors and IFAD are to be congratulated on making an effort to share their experiences through such a format. Too much of what goes on under the banner of “development” goes unreported or at best ends up as internal reports sitting on shelves. Unfortunately, this book—as a source of useful lessons for policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers—is flawed in a number of ways.

Reading the acknowledgments reveals the first problem: the book covers only a 2-year period. The authors’ claims of a “success story” must therefore be taken with a pinch of salt. It will take many more years, and more in-depth assessments of individuals and households, to ascertain how transformative the initiative has really been. The second significant flaw lies in the written style and

overall delivery. The lead author is a journalist, and his background shows in the vignettes of rural life in Madagascar. While I enjoyed the color these added to the book, they tend to play to stereotypes of both Madagascar and the Malagasy and were symptomatic of a tendency toward sweeping generalization. For example, the authors state that “Malagasy farmers practice subsistence agriculture, producing barely enough to feed their families” (Shapiro et al 2010: 34). While there is little question that life for rural households in Madagascar is often challenging, such statements lump together a hugely diverse set of practices and livelihoods and contradict much of the research on agriculture in Madagascar. Christian Kull’s (1998) work in the highlands of Madagascar, for example, has revealed a rich and diverse patchwork of livelihoods, with farmers shifting from extensive land use practices to intensive market gardening. Some farmers in Madagascar have been able to generate considerable wealth by profiting from booms in agricultural commodity prices (Minten and Méral 2006; Scales 2011), although this has often come at a high environmental cost. Appreciating and understanding the diversity of rural households and strategies would go a long way to improving policy.

The journalistic tendencies also show in the rather shallow treatment of the subject matter. The first chapter in particular, which attempts to provide a general introduction to Madagascar, would not look out of place in a travel guide. The general lack of references makes it impossible to check the provenance of the facts and figures presented. The authors list a total of 17 references for the entire book, the majority of which are organizational reports. References to rigorous peer-reviewed research are virtually absent.

In terms of concrete and useful lessons, there is little new here. In

Chapter 2, for example, we are told that “New roads have made quite a difference” (Shapiro et al 2010: 43) since they help farmers get their agricultural produce to market. Frustratingly, the book does touch on deeper and more interesting issues. With regard to maintaining transport networks to allow farmers to move their produce to markets, the authors hint at the challenges of community-organized road repairs and the need for higher-level organization and funding. Similarly, in Chapter 3, on irrigation and water management, we learn about the newly created water users’ associations to regulate the distribution of water from the new irrigation system, but there is little discussion of how these fit with existing institutions and customary rules.

The book also contains numerous contradictions and unresolved tensions. For example, when discussing the lack of commercialization of zebu cattle, the authors correctly acknowledge that “Selling bovines is considered shameful for livestock raisers. In fact, the sale of animals when the financial need does not justify it is viewed very negatively” (Shapiro et al 2010: 119). Yet a few pages later, they state that the ultimate challenge is “shifting the mindset [of those with cattle] towards a commercial perspective” (Shapiro et al 2010: 132). This leads me to question the participatory claims made by the authors and the project. Rather than working within cultural norms and acknowledging the rationale of rural livelihoods, the proposed solution is to continue with efforts to change culture: “This tradition is engrained in local society, and it will take a lot of time and great effort to change it” (Shapiro et al 2010: 139).

Overall, the book provides too little detail on the approaches taken to be useful, lacking both empirical and analytical depth. This is a shame. There are clearly many important lessons to be drawn from this case study. In the end, the

authors leave too many questions unanswered. Who were the winners and losers in the project? What were the barriers to participation and success? The preface to the book states that development is a difficult and imperfect process. Of this there is no doubt. But for development theory and practice to advance, one must be willing to acknowledge and

understand the failures and not simply document the successes.

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