Madagascar Naturellement: Birth Control Is My Environmental Priority

PRESIDENT
MARC
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Marc Ravalomanana became president of Madagascar in December 2002. He grew up in rural agricultural Imerikasina, went to school in Sweden, and returned home to make and sell homemade yogurt on the streets of Antananarivo. Aided by a World Bank loan, within several years he built TIKO, Madagascar's largest domestically owned private company and was later elected mayor of the capital city. (Photo: © David Hawxhurst, Woodrow Wilson Center)

At the recent marriage of my daughter, I altered the traditional wish of the father at Malagasy weddings, which is for the couple to have 14 children: seven sons and seven daughters. Instead, I wished the couple "to have a healthy life together and three children." I have also tried to change the way everyone in my country thinks about raising families because I have a strong personal commitment to balancing population growth with sustainable natural resources.

In my first four years as president, I have developed a far-reaching plan to free Madagascar from a cycle of poverty that harms the people and destroys the island's rich biodiversity. My dream, which I call "Madagascar Naturellement," is that we can build a strong economy, invest in our people, and maintain the nation's precious natural treasures. Family planning lies at the heart of all of these efforts. And here is how it all comes together.

My country's strengths outnumber its weaknesses and we believe in our ability to succeed. Potentially, we are a rich country. We have important natural resources, a favorable climate, strong cultural values, hard-working farmers, and opportunities in agriculture, livestock, fisheries, mining, and wood.

We also have a unique and rich biodiversity. To the outside world, my country is best known for its natural wonders. For its size, Madagascar contributes more to Earth's biodiversity than any other place. Eighty percent of our flora and fauna are unique to the island. We are best known for our lemurs. In fact, there are more than 70 varieties. But we boast other evolutionary oddities, as well: the tenrec, which is a miniature hedgehog-like animal; the fossa, which is a mongoose relative that looks like a cross between a puma and a dog; 223 out of 226 known species of frogs; more than half the world's chameleon species; neon-green day geckos; three times as many kinds of palm trees as mainland Africa; and forests of endemic spiny plants.

Yes, we do have one of the most valued ecosystems; but it is also one of the most threatened. Why has this occurred? In a word, poverty. Madagascar is among the world's poorest countries: of 17 million Malagasy people, 13 million live on less than $1 a day. In fact, the average income is 41 cents per day. More than 75 percent live in rural areas, barely living off the land that surrounds them, using whatever resources they can find.

This poverty costs my people, our country, and the world. Our traditional slash and burn method of agriculture is called *tavy* and it drives the Malagasy economy. We convert our tropical rainforests into rice fields, destroying plant and animal life and exhausting the soil, leaving behind nothing but scrub vegetation and alien grasses, eroded hillsides, and the constant threat of landslides.

When you understand the farmer's dire need, you can see why he practices tavy. As long as there is forest land freely available for clearing, he may as well use the land before his neighbor does.

Mandraitsara, a community family planning provider trained by the NGO Ny Tanintsika, displays the family planning methods she provides counseling on at her shop in the village of Ankarefobe, Madagascar (© 2005 Raharilaza/NY TANINTSIKA, courtesy of Photoshare).

The damage is easily visible in the degraded and fragmented forests of the east and the cactus scrub invasion of the spiny forests to the south. You can see it in our rivers that run red with the soil of the central highlands. Each year, about one-third of the country burns. We have already lost about 90 percent of our forest and each year we lose 1 percent of what is left. We can't afford to let the land go up in smoke and ashes. Our forests will become desert. Our biodiversity destroyed. And my people will starve.

When I ask people in the countryside what they need, they always say, in this order: roads, schools, and health centers. Health is paramount to my goals and their needs. Agriculture is the basis for most of the rural economy, but for our own people to productively work in the fields, they must be healthy. Women work hard in this rural economy and time away from the fields to have babies, to take care of sick family members, or to transport them to distant clinics is income lost. For the rural poor, time and money spent on health problems jeopardize the already tenuous levels of family and community food security.

The rapid growth of our population contributes to poor health and increased levels of poverty. Madagascar is not only one of the poorest populations in the world, it is also one of the fastest growing. Our rural population has nearly doubled since 1980 to 13.4 million last year (2005). Studies conducted in selected rural areas show that as our population increases—actual numbers of people and rates of growth—the forest cover decreases.

I think you now see, as I do, how the causes of poverty are related. One way to attack these problems is family planning. We have to help couples have the size family they want and can provide for. In rural areas of the country, a woman will have five or six children in her lifetime. I see families struggling to feed 9-10 children. I see their children—my country's future—weak from malnutrition and disease. I see farmers destroying their land in their effort to provide for their children. These sights hurt my heart.

I know we must help these families. Nearly half our population is under the age of 15 and now entering their reproductive years. There will be severe health risks for these children: early-age pregnancy, births too close together, and high incidence of chronic maternal poor health. Out of every 100,000 women, 500 die

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from pregnancy-related causes each year; in the United States, only eight die. Too-frequent births mean that children grow up without enough to eat and in poor health. In my country, 75 out of every 1,000 infants die in their first year of life; in your country, the figure is 6.43. Family planning could prevent 25 percent of our infant deaths; safe water, childhood injections, and other health interventions could prevent most of the remaining deaths.

Only if we focus our efforts where the poor people are—in rural communities—and on what their problems are will we be able to move from a subsistence to a market economy. Therefore, we have integrated programs to reach more people with new ideas. Such programs acknowledge population increases. All of what we do in Madagascar Naturellement blends programming from our Poverty Reduction Strategic Plan, the Politique Generale de l'Etat 2005, and the Madagascar Action Plan.

I asked the Ministry of Health to change its name to the Ministry of Health and Family Planning in 2004, making Madagascar one of the few nations where family planning is so explicitly recognized as a key health intervention. The ministry hosted a national family planning conference and wrote a national strategy that has already achieved some impressive results. Malagasies now have six contraceptive methods to choose from instead of four. Contraceptives are on the country's list of essential drugs, and we have welcomed private companies to enter the distribution system. We have adopted innovative programs integrating family planning and environmental activities. We have created broad action plans for youth and adolescent health, safe motherhood, and emergency obstetric care. In only a few years, the average number of children per family has decreased from 6.0 to 5.2 children per woman, one of the lowest rates among surveyed countries in Africa. Use of modern family planning methods has risen from 5 percent in 1992 to 18 percent, with rates even higher for urban women. This has occurred in a nation that has traditionally emphasized high birth rates—"a marriage blessed with many children." Having children is a good thing, but having information on when to have them is even better.

I announced a new environmental policy at the 2003 Durban World Parks Congress. There, I pledged to increase by three times—from 1.6 million hectares to 6 million—over five years the amount of land under protected-area status in this "biodiversity hotspot." I further elaborated on this in 2004 with Madagascar Naturellement, which underscores that our biodiversity is critical to the country's future economic growth and important to our national economic growth strategy.

To expedite economic growth, we launched a rapid results initiative with technical support from Harvard University advisers. And we got some other help from the United States. In 2005, the United States and Madagascar signed the first-ever Millennium Challenge Account compact. The Millennium Challenge Account is an aid initiative proposed by President Bush in 2002 to reduce poverty in some of the poorest countries in the world. Over four years, the United States will contribute $110 million, roughly doubling the amount of development-related assistance the United States gives Madagascar each year. We are proud that Madagascar is the first country to sign the compact, and we are honored to be trusted by the U.S. government, Congress, and the American people. We believe that the globalization of

A girl in rural Madagascar (Courtesy of USAID).

economies must be urgently followed by a globalization of responsibilities. Our people need water taps more than television sets.

Our success depends on crucial partnerships and strong national support. We have cultivated valuable partnerships with the U.S. Agency for International Development, the UN Population Fund, and UNICEF to improve the use of modern contraceptives so that women are able to space their children for better health. We have also strengthened ties between our government, the private sector, many technical health partners and donors, and the environmental and agricultural sectors. But our success depends on what we do at the community level.

We have introduced small, do-able actions through which mothers, fathers, and children can improve their own behavior and their own health. With help from the U.S. Agency for International Development, we created what we call "champion communities" that empower local citizens to improve health standards and food security as they protect the environment. Village volunteers teach their neighbors about family planning, vaccines, hygiene and habitat, malaria prevention, nutritious cooking, and treatment of their drinking water. Committees also address environmental degradation by focusing on the use of improved and intensive rice cultivation and on reforestation. We distribute educational materials that show how all of these needs are linked.

There is much more to be done but we are on the right road to better health and well-being and, at the same time, protecting the natural resources that God has entrusted to us. My government and I will not rest until the major cause of death is old age. This is the Malagasy dream. This is our vision, Madagascar, naturally.

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