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Global perspectives in education

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This essay will focus on the barriers to accessing good quality and consistent education in Madagascar. These barriers will be critically explored through policy frameworks, relevant theory, and lived realities.

Good quality, consistent education can have a transformative impact on an individual's life, shaping their opportunities, personal development, and future success. As supported by Chris Barnes (2022), an inclusive education officer for Down Syndrome Association, "A good education, and education system, considers the individual needs of its most valued members, the children it aims to serve." Consistent education can be defined as a balance between stability and flexibility, ensuring both academic progression and meaningful engagement over time and supports a learner's long-term academic and personal development. According to Montessori Academy of Broward (2024), "consistent schooling not only nurtures stability but also ensures that the quality of education evolves alongside the child's development.". This highlights that consistency is not about rigidity, but about providing continuity while allowing growth. Furthermore, the academy notes that "one of the fundamental benefits of consistent schooling is the ability to cater to a child's evolving academic needs." (Montessori Academy of Broward, 2024) This suggests that consistent education enables educators to respond effectively to developmental changes. With "a stable educational framework" in place, teachers can adapt the curriculum so that learning remains engaging and relevant, creating a scaffold that students can continuously build upon as their understanding deepens.

Madagascar, an island nation located off the southeastern coast of Africa, remains one of the world's lowest-income countries, with climate varying significantly, exhibiting a tropical nature along the coast, a temperate climate inland, and arid conditions in the southern regions (WWF, 2019). With a population exceeding 21 million, Madagascar is home to a multitude of faiths and customs (WWF, 2019). However, it faces significant socio-economic challenges, as approximately 70 percent of its population is estimated to live below the international poverty line (WWF, 2019).

With a predominantly rural population the country faces persistent barriers to service delivery, infrastructure development and equitable access to education. Characterised by significant structural and environmental challenges that shape both its socio-economic landscape and its education system. Furthermore, Madagascar is highly vulnerable to recurrent cyclones and prolonged droughts, particularly in the southern regions, which disrupt livelihoods, damage school infrastructure and contribute to food insecurity (World Food Programme, 2025). These environmental shocks unfortunate existing inequalities and frequently interrupt children's educational continuity. As a result, the education system operates within a context of economic fragility and environmental instability, where challenges such as under-resourced schools, teacher shortages and inconsistent attendance reflect broader socio-economic constraints (UNESCO, 2024). This widespread poverty underscores the country's heavy reliance on natural resources, as many individuals engage in subsistence farming and fishing as their primary means of livelihood.

Madagascar's system comprises five years of primary school followed by seven years of secondary education, split into four years of lower and three years of upper secondary Education Policy and Data Center (2018). In 2018, there were about 6.27 million students enrolled across primary and secondary levels, with roughly 76 % of them in primary school. (Education Policy and Data Center, 2018). Not only does this data reflect a failure of access

alone, it reveals a system under strain, where initial expansion at primary level masks deep inefficiencies and inequalities in completion and transition.

Accessing good quality and consistent education for Malagasy children and young people is hindered by several formidable barriers that go far beyond the classroom walls. Despite formal policies promoting free primary education, high poverty rates remain a defining feature of the national context, limiting household capacity to afford educational materials, transportation and associated costs. SEED, Madagascar highlights how education can be extremely difficult to access for many Malagasy families because school fees, uniforms and basic equipment often cost as much or more than a typical monthly salary “with annual costs for one child averaging around 150,000–200,000 Ariary (about £30–£40) while the minimum wage is around 208,000 Ariary per month” (Bass, 2020). As school becomes a luxury that many simply cannot afford, forcing parents to make the agonizing choice between buying supplies or putting food on the table, ultimately leading to low school participation rates.

The human capital framework suggests that families weigh costs against anticipated long-term economic returns as developed by Becker, “conceptualises education as an investment that enhances productivity and growth” (Becker, 1964, p. 13). Madagascar’s sector plans and its alignment with SDG 4 echo this logic by framing schooling as central to poverty reduction and economic transformation. However, in contexts of chronic poverty and limited formal labour markets, these returns may appear speculative. From this perspective, prioritising immediate survival over future gains is economically rational.

While the human capital framework is often critiqued for presuming stable labour market returns, the evidence presented in Financing the Education 2030 Agenda challenges the notion that prioritising immediate survival over schooling is economically rational, even in contexts of chronic poverty (Benavot, 2016). The report makes clear that the failure to realise educational returns in many low-income countries stems less from the speculative nature of education itself and more from systemic underinvestment and inequitable financing structures. With an estimated “average annual financing gap of US\$39 billion across low- and lower-middle-income countries”, and aid to pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education needing to increase “by at least 6 times” to fill this gap, constrained outcomes reflect political and fiscal limitations rather than weak intrinsic returns to education (Benavot, 2016 pg.21). Crucially, the report stresses the need for stronger national policies addressing “equity,” “efficiency,” and “effectiveness,” and recognises that “much rests outside education,” including domestic resource mobilisation and governance reform. In this light, framing non-enrolment as economically rational risks naturalising structural deprivation and shifting responsibility onto impoverished households, rather than interrogating the structural and political constraints that undermine education systems and suppress the transformative potential of sustained public investment.

Geographic barriers further compound access to education for Malagasy children, as rural areas often experience significant disparities compared to urban centers, with schools located far from home, making attendance difficult for children (Bibliothèques Sans Frontières, 2023). Additionally, resource constraints such as teacher shortages and overcrowded classrooms diminish the quality of education provided. Many schools also lack proper learning materials and facilities, which further hampers effective teaching and learning. Together, these factors create a complex web of obstacles that prevent children and young people in Madagascar from

receiving the quality education they need to thrive, ultimately impacting their prospects for the future. Bibliothèques Sans Frontières (Libraries Without Borders) supports children's education in Madagascar by bringing digital and educational resources directly to rural communities through its Ideas Box and Ideas Cube tools (Bibliothèques Sans Frontières, 2023). Since 2022, it has equipped the Fianarantsoa campus and nearby "boarding schools for success" with these portable libraries, enabling trained teachers to use tailored content to strengthen middle school students' skills and reduce dropout rates among disadvantaged rural youth (Bibliothèques Sans Frontières, 2023).

Education is constitutionally and internationally recognised as a fundamental right, yet the capability to convert that right into sustained learning is unevenly distributed (UNICEF, 2022). Drawing implicitly on Maslow's hierarchy of Needs, it is clear that the mere presence of schools does not equate to expanded freedoms if children lack nutrition, safety, time, or supportive learning environments (Bates, 2019 pg.66-67). This reinforces that education is not merely an investment but an entitlement grounded in equality and non-discrimination. Persistent gender gaps, linguistic exclusion, and poverty-related dropout represent failures of the state to fulfil this obligation. Community attitudes toward education vary significantly across regions and socio-economic groups. For some households, schooling represents upward mobility and connection to formal employment. For others, particularly in areas where schooling quality is perceived as low, teachers are irregularly paid, or infrastructure is poor, education may appear to offer limited tangible return.

Nevertheless, government efforts to strengthen education in Madagascar have been articulated through coordinated sectoral planning and policy reform. Notably, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Employment, Technical Education and Vocational Training, and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research jointly developed the Education Sector Plan (2018–2022) as a strategic framework to advance children's right to education (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2020 pg.4). The Plan sets out an overarching vision of ensuring "quality education for all" as a foundation for sustainable development, signalling an attempt to align national education policy with broader socioeconomic transformation goals (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2020 pg.4). Collectively, these policy commitments reflect a governmental recognition that expanding access alone is insufficient, rather, improving educational quality, equity and labour-market relevance is central to long-term development and social inclusion.

Socio-cultural barriers to education in Madagascar must be understood not simply as isolated "cultural problems", but as deeply embedded in household economies, gendered divisions of labour, linguistic hierarchies, and uneven state capacity. While national frameworks increasingly adopt the language of inclusion and equality, everyday realities at community level reveal persistent tensions between policy rhetoric and lived practice. Moreover, cultural norms are often treated as static "barriers" rather than adaptive responses to structural scarcity. Early marriage, child labour, or preference for boys' education are frequently survival strategies within constrained economic systems. Without addressing underlying poverty and labour market limitations, inclusive rhetoric risks becoming symbolic. Data from UNESCO Institute of Statistics highlight that while gender parity at primary level has improved with "62 percent for girls and 57 percent for boys in 2022", disparities widen in lower secondary education "with only 34.6 percent of girls and 30.9 percent of boys" (UNESCO, 2024). Dropout rates for girls increase during early adolescence, reflecting entrenched socio-cultural expectations around domestic labour, caregiving, and early marriage.

In many Malagasy households, girls shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic responsibilities such as cooking, water collection, childcare, and agricultural support, especially in fishing communities. According to the World Wildlife Fund (2019), approximately “1.5 million people depend on fishing livelihoods in Madagascar, and well over half of fishers are women, who are also the primary cleaners, processors, and sellers of marine products”. In such contexts, girls are often integrated early into these value chains, supporting families rather than attending school consistently. Here, gender norms intersect with subsistence economies, girls’ labour is not supplementary but central to household survival.

Although national policies formally prohibit child marriage and promote girls’ schooling, customary practices persist, especially in economically vulnerable communities. In many settings, especially economically marginalised or crisis-affected communities, entrenched customary norms and gendered expectations continue to prioritise girls’ marital status over schooling, revealing a profound disconnect between policy intent and social practice. Unfortunately, early marriage not only interrupts girls’ schooling but actively undermines their long-term educational prospects. Supported by the research (Glick, Handy and Sahn, 2015) “an additional year of schooling resulted in a delay of marriage by 1.5 years. Marrying one year later delayed the age of first birth by 0.5 years.” underscoring the developmental and reproductive health implications of educational disruption. Marriage can be viewed as a strategy to reduce household financial burden or secure social protection for daughters. Consequently, schooling becomes secondary to perceived social and economic security. On the contrary, UNICEF (2018) notes a global decline in child marriage, including a reported 15 per cent reduction in the proportion of young women married before adulthood, this progress is uneven and insufficient. Despite measurable gains, no region is currently on track to meet the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal target of eliminating child marriage, underscoring the limitations of existing interventions and the persistence of structural barriers sustaining the practice.

In summary, socio-cultural barriers to education in Madagascar operate at the intersection of poverty, gender, language, and community norms. Girls’ disproportionate domestic burdens, early marriage practices and rational household responses to economic insecurity collectively shape patterns of exclusion. A critical perspective reveals that these are not isolated cultural deficits but manifestations of structural inequality. Bridging the gap between inclusive policy discourse and lived reality requires not only legislative reform but transformative investment at household and community levels, ensuring that rights to education translate into genuine capabilities for all children.

In international policy and academic literature, good quality and consistent education is framed not just as access to schools, but as a comprehensive, equitable and lifelong learning process that meets global commitments. Under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), it is stated that the aim is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,” (Gaia Education, 2025) which underscores that quality must be both fair and ongoing throughout a person’s life, rather than sporadic or limited to certain age groups or gender. The Gaia Education article (2025) explains that SDG 4 encompasses a range of targets, including providing “inclusive and equally high quality education for all,” ensuring “equitable access to free primary and secondary education,” and offering “accessible and affordable opportunities for lifelong learning for all,” highlighting the importance of stability and continuity in learning environments. These emphasises that quality is measured not only by

enrolment but by effective learning and outcomes, strongly linking consistency with equity, relevance and the ability of education systems to adapt to evolving learner needs over time criteria that together define what good quality, consistent education should look like on a global scale.

Internationally, Madagascar is party to key human rights and development instruments, all of which affirm a right to inclusive and equitable quality education. These commitments position education not only as a social service but as a foundational investment in human capital formation, linking schooling to long-term economic productivity, social mobility and national development. Within this, education is constructed as both an intrinsic entitlement and a strategic tool for poverty reduction. However, global analysis by UNICEF (2024) in *All In: Towards Tangible Solutions for Equity and Inclusion in Education* highlights that formal alignment with international frameworks does not automatically translate into equitable human capital outcomes. The report stresses that inclusion must move beyond expanding enrollment to systematically identifying and addressing intersecting disadvantages, including poverty, disability, geographic isolation and exposure to crisis. In this light, Madagascar's policy commitments reflect normative compliance with global standards, yet the transformative potential of education as human capital development depends on whether policy frameworks are operationalised through targeted, equity-driven interventions.

International and regional influences have been instrumental in shaping the direction of Madagascar's education sector, both in terms of policy priorities and the scope of reform implementation. Notably, the World Bank has supported Madagascar through targeted operations such as the Madagascar Basic Education Support Project, which prioritises improving learning conditions, strengthening teacher effectiveness, and enhancing sector governance, particularly in disadvantaged regions (World Bank, 2018). This programme reflects a broader emphasis on accountability, data-driven planning, and decentralised service delivery, illustrating how international financing mechanisms are closely tied to structural reform agendas and performance-based outcomes. In parallel, regional and continental cooperation has been strengthened through initiatives led by the UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA), which has engaged in capacity development efforts in Madagascar aimed at improving teacher policy, leadership training, and institutional resilience (UNESCO, 2024). Through such collaboration, Madagascar benefits from technical expertise, peer learning networks, and policy guidance that link national reforms to broader African education transformation strategies. These influences have collectively strengthened policy coherence and international visibility, while securing necessary aid flows in a context of fiscal vulnerability. However, they also underscore the delicate balance between national ownership and donor-driven priorities, as reform trajectories are frequently shaped by external funding cycles, conditionalities, and globally defined performance indicators.

An estimated "94 percent of children unable to read and understand an age-appropriate text by the age of 10" UNESCO (2024). Emphasizing the quality of education in Madagascar is frightful. Attributed by shortages of trained and regularly paid teachers, overcrowded classes, poor infrastructure and limited learning materials (The World Bank, 2017). Although recent donor-supported programmes have targeted teacher training, school construction and better resource allocation, they operate within a context of tight public finances and institutional fragility, limiting their transformative potential. These educational constraints are tightly linked to

Madagascar's broader development profile. The country remains low-income, with one of the lowest GDP per capita and public revenue in the world (The World Bank, 2017).

The UNESCO "Training the next generation of educational planners in Madagascar" article underlines how deeply the system's problems are tied to an underqualified and under-supported teaching force, which strengthens the case for better-funded, better-trained teachers (Pereyra, et.al 2024). It highlights that Madagascar is investing in building national capacity for educational planning and management, precisely because weak planning has contributed to chronic shortages, uneven deployment, and poor working conditions for teachers, especially in rural areas. By training Malagasy officials in data-driven planning, financing, and human-resource management, the programme aims to ensure that future policies can increase the share of qualified teachers, allocate them more equitably across regions, and secure sustainable funding for their salaries and continuous professional development. This supports a critical argument that solving Madagascar's education crisis is not only about having more adults in classrooms, but about systematically funding and professionalising a qualified teaching corps so that every child is taught by a trained, supported teacher rather than by underqualified, precariously paid staff (Pereyra, et.al 2024).

In conclusion, barriers to accessing good quality, consistent education for Malagasy children and young people are neither singular nor merely logistical, they are systemic, layered and mutually reinforcing. While significant gains have been made in expanding enrollment and aligning national policy frameworks with global commitments, access in a formal sense has not translated reliably into sustained, meaningful educational participation. The central challenge, therefore, is not simply getting children into classrooms, but ensuring that those classrooms are adequately resourced, staffed, and governed in ways that enable consistent learning outcomes.

These are compounded by socio-economic and gendered inequalities, widespread poverty constraints, the indirect costs of schooling, children facing geographic isolation, gendered expectations around domestic labour, early marriage and care responsibilities continue to disrupt educational trajectories. Although policies promoting universal primary education and inclusion exist on paper, limited fiscal capacity, weak monitoring mechanisms and uneven decentralised administration hinder effective delivery. Structural poverty reduces state revenue, which constrains educational investment, weak governance limits the targeting of resources to the most marginalised, and socio-cultural norms shape who benefits from existing provision.

Looking forward, reform efforts must move beyond expansion towards consolidation and quality enhancement. Targeted investment in rural infrastructure, comprehensive teacher professionalisation and retention strategies, gender-transformative programming that addresses early marriage and care burdens, and stronger accountability and monitoring systems are essential. Ultimately, ensuring good quality, consistent education in Madagascar requires confronting the structural conditions that shape educational disadvantage. Until systemic poverty, governance fragility and entrenched inequalities are addressed in tandem, the promise of universal, high-quality education will remain only partially fulfilled.

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