

Experts and the Subjects of Expertise: Education and Development in Madagascar

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I conducted dissertation fieldwork in the eastern region of Atsinanana, Madagascar between July 2008 and March 2009. The investigation concentrated on two development projects that sought to transform the livelihoods of rural Malagasy by training them in market techniques and “modern” agricultural practices. These projects were tightly linked to the development objectives and resources of the Malagasy state under Marc Ravelomanana, the support of international aid organizations, and the cooperation of local stakeholders.

My primary research questions were: 1) How do international partnerships affect the implementation and maintenance of state-led development interventions? and 2) How does the interaction of disparate actors (local farmers, agricultural technicians, bureaucrats, project administrators and project partners), influence the types of knowledge and status conveyed by the projects. Ethnographic research was conducted among these groups over a variety of settings including rural homes, development conferences, consciousness-raising events, strategy sessions, and rural evaluations.

The rural development initiatives I examined were characterized by struggles over the definition of the rural subject worthy of training, the types of knowledge worthy of dissemination, and the ideal subjects to be produced through “development.” These struggles, and the more material struggles over funding, materials, land, and status that they are associated with, propelled these projects into a state of constant evolution where the continuation of the project, and not its successful completion, became the preeminent goal. This dynamic brought political prowess to the fore as project directors struggled to align the projects to the changing objectives and commitments of government and international partners, while maintaining or expanding their status among rural stakeholders.

Struggles among different interest groups were mirrored in the Malagasy political environment, where



in December 2008, the young mayor of Antananarivo, Andry Rajoelina, questioned President Ravelomanana’s commitment to democracy and development. With local business interests, former Malagasy leaders, and perhaps the silent support of the French government behind him, Rajoelina accused Ravelomanana of being a dictator concerned more with personal profit than the needs of the Malagasy people and named himself president of a transitional government in March 2009. The effect of the crisis on development funding was swift: the Millennium Challenge Account grant was cancelled, the World Bank froze its activities, and a number of state-led development programs were paralyzed. At the same time, the French continued their aid programs and a number of Arab nations stepped in, thereby transforming the geopolitical dimensions of Malagasy aid.

As the crisis continues, the landscape of agricultural development is shifting in a way reminiscent of the transformations undergone during earlier political crisis in Madagascar, forcing development projects to re-align their efforts and their understandings of development to the dynamic and interlinked politics and preferences of government regimes, regimes of aid, and local stakeholders. In the long run, it will be rural populations who have participated in development programs who will suffer from these struggles, as interventions in their communities are abandoned or shifted elsewhere while projects align to the new contours of development objectives at the national and international levels.

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