



**Project Fanaka:
Provision of classroom furniture to primary and middle schools in Fort
Dauphin Urban Commune, Anosy Region, Madagascar**

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1. Background



Madagascar is one of the most impoverished and least developed countries in the world, ranking 145/182 countries in the 2009 Human Development Report. Three-quarters of the population live below the international poverty line (\$[US]1.25 a day), with the majority living in isolated rural communities, working traditionally in subsistence agriculture and fishing. Isolation of communities and lack of state capacity mean service delivery is extremely poor; government educational services, extremely limited as they are across the island, do not reach grassroots communities. The creation of a successful primary education system by *“increasing school capacities especially in vulnerable zones, through the development of school infrastructures, the training and the recruitment of new teachers”*¹, is

listed as one of the main educational challenges in the Madagascar Action Plan (MAP) 2007-2012.

Within the Anosy Region in the south east, these facets of poverty are seen at their most extreme; almost 40 years of no intervention or investment by the state or other service providers has allowed for chronic poverty to worsen, with no upkeep of existing – or provision of new - transportation/communications infrastructure and no provision of services. Whilst the government has adopted a detailed strategy paper for poverty reduction (PRSP), Anosy's isolation means that little has changed, and the region's population suffers one of the lowest per capita incomes and highest rates of disease, infant mortality (34% in some communities) and illiteracy (over 80%).

Fort Dauphin Urban Commune (or Tolagnaro), where Azafady is based, is the urban centre of Anosy Region. The population in this small town has exploded in recent years as a result of immigration from rural areas as impoverished people look for some form of employment. It is also part of the Project 'Poles Integres de Croissance', making it an area designated by the government for rapid and sustainable economic development on account of its unique location and natural beauty. However, Fort Dauphin remains one of the most impoverished and least developed areas in Madagascar, and unemployment is a huge problem in the Commune. As levels of poverty and unemployment increase, a growing number of children are being withdrawn from school in order to support their family in income generating activities (street vending, home and agricultural help).

Further to the already chronic instability are the ongoing effects of the 2009 political crisis, which have been seen to impact particularly on Madagascar's children. As a recent UNICEF report points out: "The crisis, at both a political and economic level, is accelerating the erosion of essential services in the whole social sector, and the impact on children is severe. We are seeing a minimum 20 - 30 % decrease in the education budget; as a result, funds and materials are not reaching schools."



The need for improvements to the quality of education and learning environment is therefore vital. Despite various restrictions to education opportunities, schools are heavily over capacity, such is the desire to learn. Class sizes range from 100 to 200 students, but often have only sufficient furniture for a fraction of these. Such conditions severely hinder children's ability to learn - it is no surprise that illiteracy rates in this area are among the highest nationally. To date, Azafady have concentrated school building activities in surrounding rural Communes, however

¹ Madagascar Action Plan (MAP), Commitment 3, Educational Transformation, Challenge 2, "Create a successful primary education system"

CISCO (local representation of the Ministry of Education)'s current priority is for provision of furniture to 5 urban schools. The provision of benches and tables to children within priority schools in the urban commune is expected to significantly increase attendance and improve quality of education, benefiting over 2,000 children in each school over the next 10 years – with benefits extending through the communities within which these schools are embedded.

2. Project History

For the past ten years Azafady has worked closely with local communities in Fort Dauphin urban commune and surrounding rural areas in the Anosy region. The NGO pursues an integrated, multi-disciplinary intervention strategy utilising the Sustainable Livelihoods approach to poverty alleviation as promoted by the UK Department for International Development (DfID) in conjunction with the University of Sussex. Activities focus on the fields of community health, livelihood diversification and natural resource management as priority areas for the region identified at grassroots level by communities themselves. In all projects within these 3 programme areas, Azafady work to empower communities through provision of practical inputs, training and education through Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques.

Project Fanaka (meaning 'furniture' in Malagasy) was developed in response to additional needs identified through Azafady's school building programme, Project Sekoly. Since 2006, Azafady have worked in partnership with CISCO in providing primary school buildings and teacher's accommodation along with latrines and a safe drinking water source to priority communities, for each of which CISCO sources a qualified teacher. Whilst project activities have previously focused on school building in rural communities, there exists within Fort Dauphin Urban Commune an urgent need for some 500 classroom benches and tables, and it is this that CISCO identified as their key priority for the first quarter of 2010. Project Fanaka is therefore part of an ongoing process of provision of furniture for high priority schools, in response to both community and government requests.



Lanirano CEG (Middle School), the priority school identified by CISCO, currently has 3 classrooms, one of which is badly leaking – children sit with their feet in puddles on the floor – and another one of which has rotting walls. Prior to this project, the school had just 30 poor quality benches for the whole school of some 416 children. With the majority of children needing to sit on the floor or stand, their ability to learn was severely impacted.

The population around Lanirano has exploded in recent years as a result of immigration from rural areas, impoverished people looking for some form of employment, making the provision of benches to this school particularly urgent. Further to this, Lanirano and Tanambao CEG are Fort Dauphin's only two non-fee paying schools and thus represent the only two possibilities for many young people to access secondary education. Tanambao CEG, both due to a lack of teacher capacity and inadequate infrastructure, currently has a long waiting list, which has resulted in the Lanirano CEG needing to take in the surplus of children that Tanambao is not able to serve. In addition, Lanirano CEG has to work on a rotational

schedule as the classrooms do not have enough benches and are for the most part in a state of severe disrepair, such that they are unable to teach all the children at the same time.

Particularly during rainy season (December-April) the difficult situation in schools is made worse, the physical impacts of rains on the building making this environment less conducive to effective learning.

3. Project Activities:

3.1 Preparation

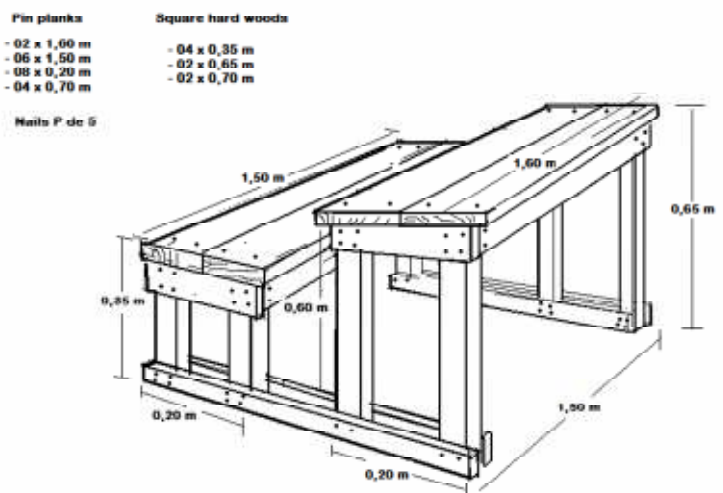
Preparations for the project began in December 2009 with official meetings between CISCO and Azafady to finalise the priority needs of the schools within the commune and agree a schedule for the 96 benches that were to be built using the funding generously provided by Trade Aid. It was agreed that all 96 benches would be allocated to the CEG in Lanirano and that these would be all handed over at the same time. The construction department made this a priority for their department and scheduled the work to be started immediately after their return from the bush in February. In addition, time was freed up in Azafady's international volunteer programme ('Pioneer') schedule during February in order that volunteers could work on making the benches.

3.2 Implementation



Construction began in mid February 2010 with Pioneers working alongside the construction team at our site at Lanirano.

The Azafady construction team who worked on Project Fanaka are all experienced local carpenters used to working with the bench design and materials. The benches themselves are made of pine wood sustainably sourced from forests in the central plateau. This wood was used due to its suitability for furniture making but also, as it is grown specifically for this purpose, it ensures that other native and rarer species are not used, thus preserving the forests around the immediate Fort Dauphin area. The design of the benches agreed upon between CISCO and Azafady each seat 3 children and measure 1.5m x 65cm, incorporating both a seat and a writing area, in the following design:



The activity of bench construction initially proceeded straightforwardly. Firstly, the construction team would build the bench and then over a period of 1-2 days would sand it to ensure that no splinters were on either the seat or the writing table. Once that was complete the benches would be varnished and left in the sun to dry and to air.

Work was progressing well when in early March a tropical storm hit the south east of Madagascar, the focus of the storm being just north of Fort Dauphin itself. The storm continued for 19 days during which time the town suffered flooding and, with roads having become impassable, food shortages. Azafady's workshop site at Lanirano was itself flooded and work on the project had to cease for the duration of the storm.

Once work was resumed in mid-March, the benches already made had to be dried out and in some cases re-sanded and varnished. In addition work could not continue outside as it had done and what had been an eating area was set aside for work during the day.

The situation in the school had also considerably worsened due to the extreme weather conditions. Throughout the storm, due to the bad state of repair of the building, water had not only come through the leaking roof but also through the walls of the school. This had meant that the school floors, where many of the children were sitting, had become pools of water. Some parents chose to not send their children to school due to fears for their health. This situation made completion of the project especially urgent and the construction team worked longer hours in order to complete the benches. A typical day consisted of the team coming in and putting out benches to dry first thing in the morning, constructing benches throughout the day and then working late to ensure that the benches that were dry could then be varnished and put away safe from any rain that night.

The benches were completed in late March and are due to be handed over during the week of 12th April when the children return from an Easter break.

3. Results:

With Trade Aid's donation, Azafady were able to build a total of 96 benches for Lanirano CEG. This intervention will be of great immediate benefit to children currently attending the school. In improving the quality of the learning environment, it is anticipated that rates of attendance and effective capacity to learn of some of Madagascar's most vulnerable children will significantly increase, thereby contributing to a long term bolstering of Madagascar's human resources.

Provision of 96 new high quality benches for Lanirano Middle School will provide seating for nearly 300 children, who will no longer have to work standing or sitting on wet floors.





The provision of the benches has also meant that there is now an option for the school to use an old shelter that has no walls as an additional classroom in the good weather, as some benches can be used there to make a temporary classroom. Space has become more and more of an issue in the school as numbers have further increased due to migration to the town, creating a situation in which students of up to 3 different school years are being taught in one classroom.

“It is hard for most people to understand the importance of having a seat at a desk to a child’s education. I can remember my first day at school when I arrived to find only a few benches in the room and all of them taken by the older children. For the next few months I sat bent over on the floor, struggling to write notes from the board, sitting in the cold and the damp and trying to understand what the teacher was saying. I was one of the lucky ones – I got a seat because the teacher found out that I was smart and shouldn’t be on the floor, and a desk after a couple of months. To be able to provide these benches to all of these children so they will not have to struggle on the floor any longer has been a project close to my heart.”

Lomba – Head of the Azafady construction team

4. Conclusions and future work

With requests continually coming in for new benches in similar schools, the work of Project Fanaka is planned to continue for the foreseeable future. The Lanirano Middle School is also on a high priority list for repair and development within Azafady’s school building initiative *Project Sekoly*, and a full refurbishment of the leaking superstructure and expansion of capacity is planned for later in the year. It is hoped that by the time of the next rainy season, the school will have all the benches needed and refurbished buildings within which the children of the area can concentrate on their studies. The provision of benches has already proven to be a vital improvement to the inadequate infrastructure of the school, encouraging children’s attendance and enhancing their overall learning environment.

