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Bringing Flowers back to the Cité des Fleurs: A Geographical Study of the Sôma Beach Development Project in Mahajanga

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Bringing Flowers back to the Cité des Fleurs: A Geographical Study of the Sôma Beach Development Project in Mahajanga

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SIT Madagascar: Urbanization & Rural Development, Spring 2015
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Abstract

Mahajanga, Madagascar is currently watching one of its biggest development efforts unfold. The Sôma Beach project will transform the previously-bustling Village Touristique, degraded over the past decades by the ocean’s waves, into an accessible hotspot for national and international tourists. This study aimed to answer the overarching questions, “How is the Sôma Beach project being carried out?” and “How is it affecting the local population and spatial organization?” Interviews, spatial observation and analysis, and review of relevant documents were used during a month-long period in order to gather information on this topic. The study concluded that space was an influential factor in the decision-making process, particularly in the assessment of local assets, and that the community’s interaction with this space will inevitably change as a result of the implementation of the project. It also found that the planning and implementation processes involve the work of a variety of public and private entities but little to no input from stakeholders in the local community. Meanwhile, Madagascar’s complex land titling system—resulting from colonization and post-independence efforts to modify it—added, and continues to add, a dimension of confusion to negotiations with local inhabitants, providing an opportunity for government corruption and exploitation of this population.
Acknowledgements

Gratitude is important every day of our lives, but in this case I feel it is especially important to acknowledge all those who supported me as I conceptualized, developed, researched, and (eventually!) finished this project.

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Thank you to Roland Pritchett, my kind and knowledgeable advisor Reine Razafimahefa, and the SIT staff for helping to coordinate details and for sharing your experience, ideas, and resources.

Finally, thank you to the entire Majungais community, especially in Amborovy—the people I met on the bus, that one aide-chauffeur who always yelled out, “Petite Plaaaage-eh,” the familiar faces along the street, the servers at the Alliance Française, friends old and
new—your hospitality will never be forgotten, and the energy of your city and stories will stay with me forever.
Introduction

Intent. This field study idea developed from my interests in the culture and population of Mahajanga, the process of development, and the ways in which we as humans manage and manipulate space. The intersection of these ideas led me to explore current development efforts in Mahajanga, and I landed quickly on the Sôma Beach project in the Village Touristique, a plan that is current and that will have significant impacts throughout the city.

The purpose of this study was to explore the process of planning and implementing the project and the ways in which decisions are, and have been, made since its conception. I also aimed to look into the effects the project is expected to have on the local community, as well as the opinions of the population on the project’s potential benefits and drawbacks. I chose to examine all of these factors in a geographic framework in order to understand the project’s interactions with the city’s existing spatial layout and the ways in which it may change the population’s use of space in Mahajanga, particularly in relation to the local tourism industry.

A word about terminology. The name “Mahajanga” can refer to several levels of political boundaries. First, it is the name of one of the six provinces established by French colonial rule. (These borders are no longer used administratively, but references to them have recently come back into everyday speech.) Second, it is the name of two districts within the Boeny region, Mahajanga I and Mahajanga II. Third, it is the name of Boeny’s capital city, the boundaries of which are essentially synonymous with the district Mahajanga I. Finally, it is the name of a fokontany within the city of Mahajanga. In this study, “Mahajanga” will refer to the city of Mahajanga (district Mahajanga I). (For a map displaying these boundaries, see Figure 1 in Appendix I.)
It should also be mentioned that the name “Mahajanga” is often, particularly in French and English, spelled “Majunga.” In this paper, I will use the Malagasy spelling, “Mahajanga,” as I find it to be the most culturally respectful way of referring to the city. The demonym and adjectival form of the city’s name comes from the French spelling and is “Majungais,” a word that people from the area use regularly to describe themselves, often before using a country of origin, clan name, or even the word “Malagasy.” The city identity is strong in Mahajanga; Majungais come from a stunning variety of Malagasy ethnic groups and international origins. They are proud to call their city the *Cité des Fleurs* (“city of flowers,” derived from the city’s name during the period of ethnic kingdoms before it was adapted into the existing Malagasy word meaning “who heals”) or *Ville Cosmopolite* (“cosmopolitan city”) (Andrianarijaona, 2009). To honor this pride in their locale, I will use the word “Majungais” throughout this paper to refer to the people of Mahajanga and any time I would like to use the name in a descriptive sense.

**Geographic context.** Mahajanga is located on the northwest coast of Madagascar and sits on the Mozambique Channel, which separates the country from the African continent. Just south of the city lies the Bombetoka Bay, which is fed by the Betsiboka River from the highlands and in turn flows into the ocean.

The city enjoys an average of 9.8 hours of sunshine per day and an average of just 2.3 millimeters of rain per month during the months of July, August, and September, which make up the season during which they receive the highest number of visitors (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2014; L. Rakotomavo, personal communication, April 17, 2015).

Mahajanga’s geographic situation established it early on as an important port city, and it is still considered the country’s third-biggest port and the most important on the West Coast (Iktus Ingénierie, 2014). Today, the national highway RN 4 links it with the nation’s capital,
Antananarivo, which, combined with its desirable weather, allows it to be a popular and accessible tourist destination and a point of distribution for imported goods.

Andriamintantsoa (2009) argued that all major cities in Madagascar, similar to those of other colonized African nations, evolve more or less the same way, featuring “the existence of two contradictory spaces, structurally and spatially, at the heart of the city that has become the center-city”\(^1\) (p. 134). Writing that Mahajanga fits a classic interior/exterior contrast, he divided the city into two main spaces: the western, interior sector, which is “very dense, old, and structured,”\(^2\) and the eastern, exterior sector, featuring a “recent and often unorganized occupation” (pp. 135-136)\(^3\). He cited the first few years of colonial rule, specifically 1896 through 1905, as well as Indian (or “Karan”) immigration in the following few decades, as the main reasons for this “organized” growth early on. He wrote that “controlled” spread came between 1958 and 1972, mainly north of the downtown area, as the population began to increase. Finally, the city stretched north and east due to extreme population growth after 1970.

**Who are the Majungais?** As mentioned before, the Majungais identity is strong. The daily rhythm of life, the beach, the *brochettes* (meat skewers), and the Bord de la Mer (boardwalk) along the southern oceanfront are some of the most noticeable cultural icons within the community. Leisure time is important to the Majungais population; entertainment and diversion are made a priority by both the local government and people on an individual level. Geographically, the Bord is a focal point; important buildings such as the Banque Nationale sit along its edge, as does the Alliance Française, which serves as a cultural center for Malagasy and *vazaha* alike. Karaoke bars line the wide boulevard, and at night a small amusement park with a Ferris wheel and other rides opens for children. The Bord is filled

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\(^1\) This quote was translated from the original French: “l’existence de deux espaces contradictoires, structurellement et spatialement, au cœur de la ville, devenu le centre-ville”

\(^2\) This quote was translated from the original French: “très dense, ancien et structuré”

\(^3\) This quote was translated from the original French: “une occupation récente et souvent anarchique”
each night with Majungais—families, friends, couples, children—sitting and people-watching, strolling, gathered around a grill of brochettes, paying to ride horses or toy cars for a few minutes. A community member told me she didn’t know why it was such a popular spot, but that there just had to be something special about it, because so many people felt the desire to visit the area frequently (A. Raharimanana, personal communication, February 24, 2015). The warm breeze that comes off the ocean after the sun sets might have something to do with it.

It is difficult to obtain firm statistics, but population estimates I found ranged from 210,000 (Iktus, 2014) to 324,000 (Commune Urbaine de Mahajanga, 2008). The people themselves are incredibly diverse; even Antananarivo doesn’t match up to their heterogeneity (Andriamitantsoa, 2009). The Majungais ethnic makeup hasn’t changed much since the 1960s. Merina and Betsileo (highland ethnic groups) are, together, the most represented, while the Sakalava (historically located in the area) are, today, a minority and find themselves grouped with the long list of other ethnic groups present. French, Comorians, and Indo-Pakistanis are the most common foreigners in Mahajanga (Andriamitantsoa, 2009).

Development today in Mahajanga. Currently, a rapidly growing population (3% per year according to a 2004 estimate), the dilapidation of roads and port infrastructure, and a lack of sufficient health and education services are among the many issues faced in Mahajanga (Andriamintatsoa, 2009; Commune Urbaine de Mahajanga, 2008). Still, people believe it is the tourism industry that can and needs to be developed before moving on to other projects (T. Solofomanga Heriniaina, personal communication, April 21, 2015; M. Djabhan, personal communication, April 23, 2015).

At present, this effort manifests itself in the form of the Sôma Beach project, which was announced and funded by the national government and is being put into place by the municipality of Mahajanga and several private partners. They plan to restore the shoreline of
the Village Touristique after years of degradation by creating an attractive tourist site for
beach activities and entertainment while putting work into needed sanitation infrastructure. In
order to prepare the land for construction, fifteen families that occupied the area were asked
to leave in exchange for monetary compensation. It is said to be the biggest project
Mahajanga has seen in a very long time (M. Djabhan, personal communication, April 23,
2015).

It is on this project that I focused my attention in this field study. My investigation
centered around two broad questions: How is the project Sôma Beach being carried out?
How is it affecting the local population? In order to answer them, I spoke with
representatives of various entities charged with planning and implementing the project, along
with community members who may be directly or indirectly affected by its existence. I also
took into consideration the land and humans’ interactions with it over time by looking into
the area’s natural and construction history. In this paper, I will begin by describing my
methodology and attention to ethical issues in carrying out the field study. Next, I will
discuss my findings and analyze their meaning in the context of my research questions.
Finally, I will synthesize this information, drawing upon the various thematic elements of the
study, and conclude.
Methodology, Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Methodology. In order to complete the study, I used several qualitative research methods. First, I conducted structured formal and informal interviews to gather information about how the project was developed and how it is currently being put into place. Through these conversations, which were generally with representatives of the city or their partners, I learned about the various actors and the process of decision-making and construction. Second, I conducted unstructured, informal interviews with members of the neighborhood’s population. These conversations were more subjective and opinion-based, and they gave me a sense of the various perspectives involved. On the subject of population perspectives, Kaisa Korhonen wrote (2008):

…recent studies have shown that communities are far from homogeneous; multiple actors with multiple interests make up communities. I consider ‘local people’ to be one social actor with, however, several different interests. Moreover, marked differences in power exist within the community” (p. 225).

Korhonen wrote here in the context of conservation work, but I believe the concept of multiple sectors within a single “community” is relevant in the case of this research as well. With this in mind, I made sure to speak with various sub-groups of the community, avoiding the error of assuming that a single “population perspective” existed. These groups included members of the families who were asked to leave the beach, residents and a business owner in the neighborhood, and workers on the construction site. They had a variety of opinions that overlapped in some ways and differed in others.

Other research methods included observation (including participant-observation) and the use of secondary sources. Observation of the site and surrounding areas allowed me to get a sense of the spatial layout as well as the current status of the construction. I also attended a planning meeting on the site in order to better understand the process of project monitoring.
Secondary sources included statistics, a doctoral thesis by a geography professor at the University of Antananarivo, and various relevant documents provided for me by the CUM\textsuperscript{4}. These people and resources were helpful in giving me a background on the city and the project, and they provided materials such as maps and plans to which I will refer in this paper.

**Limitations.** No study is one hundred percent thorough, and it is as essential in this case as with any other to acknowledge the limitations that are present. Arguably the most significant limitation is the obvious one: As an American who speaks French as a second language, in a country where French is one of the official languages but not consistently spoken, I regularly face a communication barrier. Interview questions had to be restated at times, and certain terminology was difficult to understand before researching it later online. Documents with technical or legal language also proved to be challenging. To mitigate this issue, I received help from two people: Joelle Fabienne, whom I hired for her services, and Mohamed Djabhan, who was my main informant among the displaced families. Their help in clarifying remarks made in French, as well as translating to French from Malagasy, was indispensable. It is important to mention that either translator could have biases that affected my findings, as they are people with their own connections, experiences, and memories in this community. This is especially true in the case of Mohamed, who is himself a member of the displaced beach occupants.

Time was the other main factor. I had twenty-one days to spend in Mahajanga, and arranging meetings and establishing contact with members of the population within that window was difficult. I would have liked the opportunity to hear more stories from the people

\textsuperscript{4} CUM stands for “Commune Urbaine de Mahajanga,” or “urban municipality of Mahajanga.” Though I will refer to the geographical location as the “city of Mahajanga,” I will use term “CUM” when discussing the city government as an actor in the context of the Sôma Beach project.
who lived on the beach, but by the time I was able to obtain their contact information, there were only a few days left of my stay.

Besides these issues, finding “accurate” data (if such a thing exists) was difficult. Land titling, for example, is complicated and controversial, and different sources told me conflicting information about who the beach really belonged to, which was also often conflated with opinions about who it “should” belong to. It is beyond the scope of this paper to sort through all of the opinions and legal nuances involved in the conflict or to determine the “truth” about the land’s current or past ownership status. Instead, I use it as an example of the complex relationship between the Majungais population and the various levels of Malagasy government involved in the planning of this project, as well as the ways in which this confusion can create opportunities for government corruption and exploitation. In addition, information about the degradation of the land and the devastating cyclones Mahajanga has experienced (specifically their dates, names, and effects) varied based on the person to whom I was talking. Memory and hearsay are subjective but were often presented as indisputable fact in conversations.

While I certainly put my best effort into the project—into gaining a thorough understanding of the situation from various perspectives—and stand by my findings and analysis, it is important to bear these limitations in mind while reading this paper.

Ethical considerations. The ethics of a study must be carefully considered before, and throughout, the process of conducting the research and synthesizing the data. As part of my preparation before beginning this research, I took the SIT course “Research Methods & Ethics.” My proposal and Human Subjects Review Application were approved by the local review board. I also completed the CITI Program “Study Away ISP Students: Basic Stage.”

These trainings and formalities are necessary to understand the basic principles of ethics in field study, but they are not enough—a researcher must plan specific ways of
ensuring the safety and security of all participants and carry them out to the best of their ability throughout the course of the study itself. With this subject matter, I knew that certain issues could be sensitive, such as humans’ effects on the environment, poverty, and homelessness. In order to handle these subjects as carefully as possible, I asked for informed consent at each interview. This involves telling the interviewee about my purposes with the information and letting them know that they had the right to keep anything from me or to tell me any information anonymously. I helped interviewees feel comfortable and at-ease by interviewing them in locations they chose, such as their offices or homes. Interviews were conducted mainly in French, but in cases where the informant preferred to speak Malagasy, I spoke as much Malagasy as I was able but used a translator to make sure their true intent was being conveyed.
Findings and Analysis

Background. The Village Touristique is located on the western coast of Mahajanga and stretches along the fokontany Mangarivotra and Mahavoky Atsimo. (For a map of Mahajanga’s fokontany, see Figure 2 in Appendix I.) It is an area of some of the densest population in the city (Andriamitantsoa, 2009). Decades ago, the beach was a hotspot for tourists, and hotels and restaurants sprouted up to accommodate the high number of visitors. But after years of wear from ocean currents, the beach was destroyed and the infrastructure built upon it heavily damaged (T. Marotsara, personal communication, April 14, 2015). While some of my sources reported that these currents were natural, others said they believed the creation of Port Schneider, a port for oil tankers just off the northwest part of the Mahajangan coast, was responsible for the introduction of the currents (L. Rakotomavo, personal communication, April 17, 2015; T. Marotsara, personal communication, April 14, 2015). Today, locals are quick to warn against swimming at the beach, as these currents, natural or not, have also led to numerous drownings over the past few years.

In August 2014, President Hery Rajaonarimampianina announced his “presidential projects,” which are mandated and paid for, though not actually put into place, by the national government. Mahajanga’s five sites included such things as infrastructure repair, an indoor gymnasium, and a project called Sôma Beach (Andrianarisoa, 2014). The Sôma Beach idea had two overarching goals: to restore the damaged shoreline of the Village Touristique area and to beautify the city and boost its tourism industry (Andrianarijaona, 2014). The project was launched in November, and the work is expected to last seven months (T. Marotsara, personal communication, April 14, 2015).

The principle actors. The main entity charged with planning and implementing the project is the CUM. They are responsible for hiring a team of technical consultants (M. B. Consultants) and for making all decisions throughout the building process. They hired the
construction company Société Sino-Malgache de Travaux Publics (SMATP), who in turn hired about 215 workers to complete the job (F. Rabotovao, personal communication, April 22, 2015). One informant told me that SMATP purposely hired local workers from Mahajanga, and in the immediate surrounding area of the Village Touristique specifically (F. Rabotovao, personal communication, April 22, 2015). Certain others were skeptical of this, however, and I had a few informal conversations with workers on the site who told me they were actually from Antananarivo and Tamatave (M. Djabhan, personal communication, April 23, 2015; Anonymous, personal communication, April 27, 2015). The national government hired its own team of consultants, Iktus Ingénierie, to carry out an assessment of the land and project prior to the start; this firm also does follow-up throughout the construction process. The Ministère de la Culture et du Patrimoine (Minister of Culture and Patrimony) granted the CUM access to the land, which was, until that point, under the control of the national government. The Regional Planning Office (SRAT) did its own survey of the land as well, to ensure that the plans would be according to government building codes based on the terrain (L. Rakotomavo, personal communication, April 17, 2015; H. Ratsimandrery, personal communication, April 20, 2015). (For a diagram of all planning and implementation actors, see Figure 3 in Appendix I.)

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the planning and implementation process is the fact that it brings together so many entities which differ so significantly in form. Multiple levels of government are involved—mainly the national and the municipal, but also the regional, through the participation of the SRAT. There is also interaction between the public and private sphere; the national government and CUM are both public, of course, while both consulting agencies are private, and SMATP, the construction company, is semi-public. SMATP is also an interesting case in that it is a partnership between the Chinese government and the Malagasy government (F. Rabotovao, personal communication, April 22, 2015). This
means that there is a cross-cultural element present in the process as well. In observing one of
the weekly project monitoring meetings attended by most of these actors, I noticed that
communication with Mr. Jin, a man representing SMATP who spoke very little Malagasy and
even less French, was challenging. It seemed as though the Malagasy team members did not
have much patience or respect for him, as they often spoke loudly or in irritated tones when
he couldn’t understand, and there were several moments of laughter at his expense. Mr.
Flavien from Iktus Ingénierie told me it was difficult to work with the Chinese because they
“direct[ed] everything”\(^5\) and worked every day of the week including Sundays (personal
communication, April 22, 2015). Even among the other people present, there was a lot of
discussion about which agency was responsible for which tasks, leading me to believe that it
is, in some ways, difficult to coordinate among so many different groups.

There seemed to be little to no involvement from the population in terms of the
planning process or even the implementation part. When I asked Mohamed about this, if he
thought they used an approach that could be described as “participatory,” he said without
hesitation, “Oh no, not at all”\(^6\) (personal communication, April 23, 2015). The involvement of
local people through employment on the construction site seems to be a false or mistaken
claim as well.

**The plan.** The project can be broken down into four large structural elements: an
esplanade to serve as a venue for big events like concerts or fashion shows, amphitheater
seating for sea-watching, a pier for walks out over the water, and a marina for docking boats
of visitors. Besides these, a lifeguard station will be built on the beach for safer swimming
and two areas will be designated for sports (beach soccer and beach volleyball)
(Andrianarijaona, 2014; T. Marotsara, personal communication, April 14, 2015; T.
Solofomanga Heriniaina, personal communication, April 21, 2015). The road itself is also a

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\(^5\) This quote was translated from the original French: “dirigent tout”

\(^6\) This quote was translated from the original French: “Ah non, pas du tout”
major part of the project. The currently-dilapidated Boulevard Marcoz connects the end of the downtown area, where the Bord de la Mer sits, north to the Village Touristique. (For a map of this part of the city, see Figure 4 in Appendix I.) A 1200-meter portion of it is the process of being reconstructed and paved, and a canal next to the sidewalk is being added for runoff rainwater, as poor drainage and a lack of appropriate output have caused flooding for the neighborhood in the past (J. C. Ramanampamanonjy, personal communication, April 14, 2015; F. Rabotovao, personal communication, April 22, 2015). They plan to restrict swimming hours and distance from shore; this, along with hired lifeguards, is meant to minimize the risk of drowning and appease residents who are skeptical about the safety of being in the water (H. Marotsara, personal communication, April 14, 2015). (For a version of the plan, see Figure 5 in Appendix I.)

Another important aspect of the project is its focus on sustainable energy. As the area will be used heavily in the evenings, it will be lit with street lamps, which will be powered by solar energy (F. Rabotovao, personal communication, April 22, 2015). One of the questions discussed at the meeting I attended is where the builders will install the solar panels in order to avoid theft. Mr. Flavien told me that the purpose was to tap into the “solar wealth” of the city (F. Rabotovao, personal communication, April 22, 2015).

Once the project is in place, the CUM will hand management power over to a private company. The specific business, yet unknown, will be chosen by the city’s next mayor, elections for which are set for winter 2015⁷ (T. Marotsara, personal communication, April 14, 2015; L. Rakotomavo, personal communication, April 17, 2015). There is currently no mayor in Mahajanga. When the last one stepped down, someone was appointed to take his place and is referred to as the Président de la Délégation Spéciale (PDS). The current PDS, Tia Solofomanga Heriniaina, is called “Daddy” by the community. When I went to meet with

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⁷ Because Madagascar is in the southern hemisphere, its “winter” refers to the months of June, July and August. The specific date of the mayoral elections was postponed and is currently undetermined.
him at l’Hôtel de Ville (city hall), his secretary referred to him as “Monsieur Daddy.” Along with his familiar name comes a broad smile and a welcoming, engaged demeanor. Daddy has announced that he will be running for mayor and allegedly stepped down from the office of PDS in early April. The sources I asked didn’t have sure guesses as to whether he would win.

When asked why this specific piece of land was chosen—after all, Majungais and tourists currently frequent Amborovy’s two beaches, the Petite Plage and Grand Pavois, either one of which could be further developed—I received two main answers. The first was that the coastline, having been degraded for years previously, needed to be strengthened and protected anyway (T. Marotsara, personal communication, April 14, 2015; L. Rakotomavo, personal communication, April 16, 2015). To this end, a retaining wall of reinforced concrete is being built (J. C. Ramanampamanonjy, personal communication, April 14, 2015). The second reason is simple: proximity. The area is much closer to the Bord de la Mer and the city’s center than either of the Amborovy beaches. In order to attract more visitors, ease of access is essential (L. Rakotomavo, personal communication, April 16, 2015).

The project seems to aim to strengthen Mahajanga’s current image as a coastal vacation town through the use of its own existing assets. Specific activity-centered structures, such as the esplanade, amphitheater seating, and sports areas, for example, create spaces in which social interaction and relaxation can take place, reinforcing the leisure-focused feel of the existing downtown area and Bord de la Mer. The plan to use solar panels takes advantage of Mahajanga’s warm, sunny climate. Developing land along the coast itself may seem like an obvious choice, but it is significant: this, too, is an advantage of the geographical location of the city, and it is what creates Mahajanga’s draw for vacationers in the first place.

**The principle stakeholders.** As with any community project, the local residents can be considered the main stakeholders. They are geographically proximate to the project itself, and their lives will therefore undoubtedly be touched, in some way, by the outcome of the
Following Korhonen’s idea about multiple population perspectives, I identified two main groups of stakeholders that were not among the principle actors: the people living and/or working in the Village Touristique, and the occupants who were displaced in order to begin the project. (I use the term “occupant” here to denote a person or family who has previously lain claim to a piece of land or has constructed building[s] on the current Sôma Beach project site, whether or not they were actually inhabiting the property. Many of those who did live on the land were there with other family members. As I will discuss later on, the ownership of the land is debated.)

I first spoke with members of the second group, that of the evacuated occupants. My primary informant, Mohamed Djabhan, told me he owned a piece of land on the beach and was among fifteen different occupants (and, in some cases, their families) who were asked to leave. In the group were people who had houses on the site, people who had only pieces of land, and others who had both. Mohamed, for example, had built a small house on his parcel simply to make clear that it belonged to someone, but lived elsewhere himself (personal communication, April 23, 2015).

The CUM informed the occupants that they needed to leave and then negotiated for several months before move-out and compensation receipt dates were chosen (M. Djabhan, personal communication, April 23, 2015; T. Solofomanga Heriniaina, personal communication, April 21, 2015). As the CUM claimed that all of the land belonged to the State, the compensation was only for the houses built upon the land. The amounts were based on construction materials and area in cubic meters. One occupant felt that the amounts were somewhat satisfactory but too low compared to the value of the land itself (M. Djabhan, personal communication, April 23, 2015). Daddy provided the following figures for the compensation in our interview (though he admitted that he was relying on memory) (personal communication, April 21, 2015):
Though much of the above information was similar when talking to Mohamed and talking to representatives from the CUM, the great differences in perspective lie in discussion of the negotiations themselves, how the relationship between the occupants and the CUM really played out, and to whom the land belonged.

I first spoke about the negotiations with people at the CUM. They told me the negotiations were “amicable,” and that Daddy had been the one to encourage open dialogue with the families. They also told me the families were the ones to choose their own move-out date. Daddy mentioned that there were many protests on the site—he estimated thirty or forty—and that he went to the beach to speak with the community members each time one occurred (T. Solofomanga Heriniaina, personal communication, April 21, 2015). Mr. Henri, head of the Service de Cadastre (Land Registry), told me that Daddy made this effort for “humanitarian reasons” (H. Razafindraibe, personal communication, April 14, 2015). Daddy, echoing the idea of “social inclusion” highlighted in R.O.I magazine’s 2014 overview of the project, said, “Don’t forget, Sôma Beach is for everyone. It’s for all Majunga.” He explained that in order for a project like this to come to life, the entire community has to be in favor of it (Andrianarijaona, 2014; T. Solofomanga Heriniaina, personal communication, April 21, 2015).

When I asked about the families’ financial situations, I was told they were middle-class (H. Razafindraibe, personal communication, April 14, 2015). Daddy went so far as to say that one occupant was wealthy (personal communication, April 21, 2015).

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Material</th>
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<tr>
<td>Metal</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cement</td>
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² This calculation is based on an estimate of 2500 MGA (Malagasy currency, ariary) = 1 USD.
The perspective from my informants among the land occupants was significantly different. They said that discussions with the CUM were difficult and that the CUM “tried to break them up” and meet with them in smaller groups in order to minimize their strength in numbers. Mohamed also mentioned that the families had, at one point, a lawyer and two negotiators. He did not give specific information about what happened, but he said that the negotiators themselves became personally entwined in the issue and were given pieces of land in exchange for easing up on their support of the families (M. Djabhan, personal communication, April 23, 2015). I did not hear this story from anyone else, nor did I get any further details.

The socioeconomic status of the families was also contested in my conversation with Mohamed and that with Lydiane and Daline, two of his fellow occupants to whom he introduced me. Mohamed characterized the families as primarily poor; Lydiane and Daline described themselves as previously middle-class but now, post-displacement, poor. Daline had seven houses on the beach (some of which were bungalow-style) for her family; they now live in a small structure with several rooms, each of which sleeps multiple family members. (For a photo of the building materials left from Daline’s previous houses, see Figure 6 in Appendix I.)

Lydiane and Daline were wood and crab vendors before leaving their homes on the beach. Boats from Mahajamba Bay (about one hundred kilometers north of Mahajanga) would deliver goods, which the women would sell in Mahajanga. They said that, since moving farther from the shore, they are no longer able to maintain this livelihood, and they do not know what they will do to support their families anymore. They also mentioned a difficulty faced by a different family in the group of occupants: they were unable to find a house close to where they used to live, so they were forced to move to Amborovy, the northernmost fokontany in the city. (See Figure 2 in Appendix I.) Their children continue to
go to school in the Village Touristique and must walk several kilometers every morning and evening. The kids often eat lunch at friends’ houses closer to the school in order to minimize daily travel time (M. Djabhan, personal communication, April 23, 2015; L. Razafinmalala and D. Somanambina, personal communication, April 23, 2015).

Most significantly, Mohamed, Lydiane and Daline also told me that they had yet to receive their compensation for leaving the area. Lydiane and Daline moved out of their houses and into temporary housing (the rent of which is paid for, supposedly, by Daddy himself) on February 6, and were meant to receive payment on March 11. Six families are still waiting for this money; various people in this group go to l’Hôtel de Ville to ask for it weekly. At times, they wait for up to five hours to meet with Daddy. Some actually visit him at his home in order to increase the pressure. The women said that the excuses for not having the money ready have varied throughout the past couple of months. They started with the removal of the General Director of the Treasury, Orlando Robimanana—who had personal interest in the development of the Village Touristique for a long time, and who was evidently still involved in the project at this time—from his office in mid-March. Lydiane and Daline are doubtful that they will ever receive their compensation money (M. Djabhan, personal communication, April 23, 2015; L. Razafinmalala and D. Somanambina, personal communication, April 23, 2015).

The second group of stakeholders with which I spoke was that of community members who are not directly impacted through removal from the land but instead through their proximity to the project as residents and/or business owners. Two residents seemed initially to be unfamiliar with the project but told me, when I explained further, that it sounded like a “good” project, and that they weren’t bothered by an influx of people in the area during vacation season (Anonymous, personal communication, April 26, 2015). A

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9 This quote was translated from the original Malagasy: “tsara”
woman who worked at a corner store in the area said she thought the project should turn out well but that she was worried about the durability of the beach with regards to natural destruction (Anonymous, personal communication, April 26, 2015).

The process of negotiations between the CUM and the occupants of the beach, and the difference in perspective from each of these groups regarding how the negotiations went, gives a glimpse into the dynamic between the local government and residents. First, it is important to note the fact that the PDS encourages the community to call him “Daddy.” I believe that this, combined with his casual and warm personality, fosters a feeling of comfort, even when he may be less than genuine in his openness to dialogue. It was easy to believe him when he said that that the process was comfortable for everyone involved and that he wanted to hear the opinions of local residents. However, based on my conversations with Mohamed, Lydiane, and Daline, it seems as though the community members had little decision-making power, and that many aren’t receiving what they were promised in exchange for leaving their properties. It appears that the CUM was concerned mainly about its own interests as these discussions played out, willing to hear the population’s perspective only to make sure community members were supportive, or even just quiet, enough for the project to continue. Not only was a “participative approach” foregone, but the voiced opinions of the population were, for all intents and purposes, ignored.

**The land.** One of the main discrepancies in the information I received was about who the land actually belonged to. A 2008 national law, which was mentioned to me in my interview with the assistant to the General Coordinator of the CUM, declared the first twenty-five meters off of the oceanfront to be “natural public property” (*domaine public naturel*) (Ravalomanana, M, 2008; T. Marotsara, personal communication, April 14, 2015). As mentioned earlier, the CUM maintained in our interviews that the beach was State-owned land, as it had been designated as “patrimony,” or culturally important public land, by a 2010
decree (Ministère de la Culture et du Patrimoine, 2010). It was apparently established as such because of its historical significance related to the Sakalava ethnic group (H. Razafindraibe, personal communication, April 14, 2015). It is unclear whether it was only with the backing of the 2010 decree or also the 2008 law that the CUM insisted that the land belonged to the State. In an interview with the head of the SRAT, I was also told that the land is in a “coastline protection zone” (zone de protection du littoral) according to a map of the city projecting the year 2023 created by the agency in 2006 (H. Ratsimandrery, April 20, 2015).

My conversation with Mohamed painted a different picture. He told me he had acquired his property from someone else who had previously occupied it long enough to claim ownership¹⁰, and that he had official documents proving the existence of such a transaction (personal communication, April 23, 2015). In a later communication, he clarified that he had not been able to legally obtain the land this way, and that his 2007 bid for a land acquisition (submitted to the State) is still being processed. The CUM has also submitted a file to acquire the land. Mohamed believes the 2010 declaration of patrimony was actually originally requested by the CUM because they had “private investors who wanted to develop the area”¹¹ (personal communication, May 3, 2015). Regarding the other occupants, I was told that only three had official papers. It was unclear whether the papers are currently being processed, like those of Mohamed, or if land titles are already in the occupants’ names (Anonymous, personal communication, April 23, 2015).

Confusion about land titling is not unique to this project or to the Village Touristique. In her independent study project on the topic, SIT student Taylor Crowl writes about the complex issue of land tenure in Madagascar (2014):

¹⁰ According to Mohamed, “first come, first served” is the traditional principle of land rights in Madagascar (personal communication, May 3, 2015).
¹¹ This quote was translated from the original French: “des investisseurs privés qui voulaient développer l’endroit”
Despite the progress made since launching the PNF\textsuperscript{12} in 2005, Madagascar’s land reform has not solved every problem with the post-colonial system of land titling. At the moment, heated discussions on land security are rampant throughout the country. Articles recounting land disputes appear weekly in the national newspapers, various State-run projects and development NGOs have released conflicting progress reports on the PNF, and countless Malagasy have horrific tales about their own interactions with the country’s morphing land policies. In some cases, land certificates have augmented problems that range from the exploitation of natural resources to institutional corruption. In addition, and possibly most importantly, the vast majority of arable land remains untitled and uncertified (p. 14).

Crowl raises two significant and relevant points here. First, she references the importance of looking at the issue in the context of Madagascar’s post-colonial position. French colonizers brought with them a land titling system that “did not secure land for the masses but gave rights to the colonizers and elites,” and “when Madagascar gained independence in 1960, the country’s system of land tenure through titles remained largely unchanged” (Crowl, p. 11, 2014). This system, combined with the “principle of land acquisition in Madagascar, that the land belongs to the person who requested it first,” creates a complicated and self-contradicting structure in the country (M. Djabhan, personal communication, May 3, 2015).

Like many challenges in the Madagascar, this one can be traced, at least in part, to the influence of colonialism in the country’s history. The second important point that Crowl brings up is the idea of “institutional corruption.” In the case of the Sôma Beach project, it is not cynical to suggest that this may be taking place, specifically with regards to the State’s declaration of “patrimony,” which some community members thought of as a term used to hide other intentions. The government—whether at the State or at the municipal level—tried

\textsuperscript{12} The PNF, or Plan National Foncier, was a “country-wide land reform” program created by the national government, in partnership with various non-governmental organizations, in 2005 (Crowl, p. 12, 2014).
to convince local inhabitants to give it up for years. It can be argued, then, that the “elites” are still being favored today, through “institutional corruption” that has the opportunity to manifest when laws are so unclear.

**Goals, expectations, and impressions.** No matter who is talking—a CUM representative promoting the project or a community member giving a personal opinion—the most common summary of what the project should, and will, accomplish is the “*embellissement de la ville,*” or the beautifying of the city. It is implied that this is for Majungais and tourists alike. With regards to tourists, the CUM’s goal is to attract more people and to make the area more geographically friendly for those who visit. Daddy told me he wants to bring people to Mahajanga because tourists bring money that can be deposited into the Majungais economy through hotels and bungalows, restaurants, markets, and even parts of the informal sector such as women selling fruit on the street or men driving *pousse-pousses* (personal communication, April 21, 2015). The esplanade will also be available for rent for big events, a portion of the money from which will become revenue for the city. It was also suggested that real estate values could rise as a result of the project (L. Rakotomavo, personal communication, April 17, 2015).

Community members seemed to have a similarly positive opinion of the project; even the displaced occupants with whom I spoke believed that it could make the city more beautiful and attract tourists (M. Djabhan, personal communication, April 23, 2015; L. Razafinmalala and D. Somanambina, personal communication, April 23, 2015). The key difference in perspective seemed to be that citizens were less optimistic about the outcome than representatives of the CUM were, saying that the project would benefit the city if it truly did what it claimed to be attempting to do. Some were nervous about safety and didn’t believe the CUM’s plan for restricted swimming hours and areas was sufficient, and others were nervous about the protection of the beach from the sea’s encroachment. Another warned
that, the more people who are around, the higher the petty crime rate (E. Chan-Ming, personal communication, April 27, 2015).

**Synthesis**

After learning about the plan for, and various perspectives on, the Sōma Beach project, we can examine it through three lenses. First, we can analyze the ways in which the planners used spatial assets in their decision-making process, are currently manipulating
space in the Village Touristique to carry out these plans, and are creating new spaces to meet the needs of their population and of the tourists they hope to attract. Second, we can discuss the interactions between the planners and the Majungais population, specifically the degree to which community members have been included in the decision-making process and their perceptions of the government’s receptiveness to their opinions. Finally, we can look on a more broad scale at the complicating effects that Madagascar’s colonial legacy has had on such systems as that of land titling, and how these play out in the Village Touristique.

**Space: assets, manipulation, creation.** It is impossible to argue that the Sôma Beach project itself is not inherently spatial. It is, after all, a process in which a space is chosen, transformed, and used to fulfill various goals. In this case, these goals are the protection of coastal land and the creation of an area for social interaction for the Majungais population and visiting tourists. The planners used, to some extent, an asset-building approach for community development in what Green and Haines would refer to as local economic development (2011). Asset identification and building focuses on a community’s existing strengths and resources, rather than its needs, through working with what is available and thereby giving the members of the community a certain agency in their own fate (Green & Haines, 2011). In the case of the Sôma Beach project, planners identified three key assets that could be developed in order to increase tourism and boost the Majungais economy: the beach, the climate, and proximity. Mahajanga, as a coastal town, is known for its beaches. The images conjured by their mention relate to leisure and entertainment, and they attract tourists both national and international. The planners also understood that solar energy could be used in this sunny town to create an environmentally-sustainable lighting system along the sidewalks. The idea of sustainability is not only important in and of itself, but it adds to the project’s list of appealing features when trying to garner enthusiasm in the local community about the project and the effort that is being dedicated toward it. Third, the planners
recognized the importance of proximity and accessibility in creating this space. They chose to develop the Village Touristique, rather than the Petite Plage, Grand Pavois, or any other part of the Majungais shoreline, because it is close to the downtown area that is already a socially central point in the city. It is necessary to note, however, that the emphasis on “public participation” in asset-based community development is not present in the case of the Sôma Beach project, as will be discussed in more detail later.

When looking at the project from a geographical point of view, it is worth mentioning the planners’ manipulation of the space as it currently exists. The road, for example, represents an attempt to link significant points of interest throughout the city. The way this space is used is changing as a result of the project, as well; the previous inhabitants have been asked to leave, and the land is therefore being transformed from a private (in practice, though perhaps not in legal terms) space into a public one. This space will be public on a large scale; not only will community members be able to use it freely, but Malagasy tourists and international ones will begin to use it, particularly during the vacation months.

Creation of space is also a part of this process. Through their careful design—including an area in which entertainment such as concerts or fashion shows might take place, two sports facilities, and spacious walking zones—the planners create a space for social interaction among community members, something that will perhaps even rival the beloved Bord de la Mer. This space will reinforce the city culture’s emphasis on leisure, inviting Majungais and tourists to take part in a variety of activities that aim to foster community and, at the same time, boost the local economy.

**Planners and the population.** The interactions between the planners and community members have been significant throughout the entire process and will continue to be so. Through this study it has become clear that, though the Sôma Beach project involves collaboration among a diverse group of actors, all of these actors are entities with previously-
established power in society. The State and the CUM have control for the obvious reason that they are segments of the government, while the private and semi-public companies involved are powerful by virtue of the fact that they have been handpicked by this government, and in certain cases—specifically that of M. B. Consultant—they actually represent the interests of the CUM at meetings. It is worth mentioning that the CUM, itself a level of government, holds all decision-making power.

Naku and Afrane (2013) wrote that a participatory planning approach in development is “today seen as the path-way to successful local community development” (p. 186). They cite, among many definitions of participatory planning, Arnstein’s ladder of participation, which organizes levels of community involvement in decision-making processes from non-participation to citizen power. In the case of Sôma Beach, we might identify the level of participation as the middle rung, what Arnstein calls “tokenism.” With this degree of influence, “people are allowed to participate to the extent of only expressing their views but no real say that matters to impact the decision process” (p. 186). Daddy, in our interview, discussed his desire to converse with community members, but he did not say that this was for the purpose of making more informed decisions regarding the direction of the project. Instead, his goal was to make sure everyone was in favor of the existing plan (personal communication, April 21, 2015). In other words, he wanted to use the so-called opinions of the local population to support decisions that were already made. Mohamed said that beach occupants had little choice when it came to questions such as the amounts of money the families would receive as compensation (personal communication, April 23, 2015). There is a clear discrepancy between the government’s perception—or perhaps just its publicized perception—of public participation in the project and the amount of power the population actually has.
A third piece in the examination of planner-population interactions is the population’s opinion of the planning entity. Based on my interviews with local community members, it seems as though they see the project as a truly good idea, but one that has several potential faults. The question of swimmer safety came up several times, as did the question of whether the beach or the infrastructure being built will be durable over time and through the types of extreme weather that Mahajanga experiences, particularly cyclones. The fear of drowning and storms is extremely present in the memory of the local population. The beach occupants I interviewed doubted that they will ever receive their promised monetary compensation, and one could argue that the CUM’s history of making excuses has done little to instill confidence that the outcome might be otherwise.

The relationship between the planners and the population has ranged from non-existent to fairly hostile throughout the process. The population’s voiced perspective has been generally unsolicited or, if received, set aside in favor of centralized, power-sustaining decision-making structures. This, combined with lingering doubts from social memory, has created a lack of faith in the government and planning actors’ plans. Still, community members are optimistic about what the project could offer to the city in terms of economic growth and local diversion if it truly accomplishes its goals.

**Colonial legacy.** Finally, we must acknowledge the role that Madagascar’s history as a colonized nation plays in the Sôma Beach story. As Crowl (2014) discusses in her independent study paper, the land tenure system in Madagascar features a convoluted mélange of colonial-era titling practices and traditional principles about rightful ownership of land. She writes about recent efforts to reconcile these conflicting ideas and to create a clearer, more navigable, system, but she explains that these efforts have excluded certain sectors of the population from access to land. In the case of Sôma Beach, ambiguous laws have generated a situation in which people may have occupied a piece land for years without
technically “owning” it. Currently, these unclear systems, and the power that the government has within them, are exacerbating the rift between planners and population by heightening disagreements between the groups. Meanwhile, this confusion creates an opportunity for government corruption—as exemplified by Mohamed’s hypothesis about the CUM requesting for its own reasons that the land be labeled as patrimony—that can be used for the exploitation of often-powerless community members, as they are either unable to gain the necessary paperwork for the land they have been inhabiting or are told to leave anyway because of land-related laws that may be too complex to question. The lack of participatory planning approaches in the decision-making process of the Sôma Beach project, therefore, not only further reinforces centralized, top-down development methods, but also hurts community members economically and socially.

Thus, by looking through a spatial lens, examining the planner-population relationship, and taking into consideration the historical and social context of Madagascar, we can understand the ways in which the Sôma Beach project has been planned and implemented in order to attain its goals for Mahajanga, and we can begin to make sense of how government-led development efforts may manifest themselves in Madagascar as a whole.
Conclusion

This paper described and analyzed the Sôma Beach development project in the Village Touristique neighborhood of Mahajanga, Madagascar. I began by describing the background of the project in the context of Mahajanga as a geographic location and of the Majungais culture. I went on to record the information I gathered regarding the planning and implementation processes of the project, as well as details about actors and their roles. Next, I brought in perspectives from stakeholders in the population, focusing particularly on the voices of the beach’s occupants who were displaced in order for construction to begin. I discussed the interactions between this group and the decision-making entities, exchanges that were, in terms of providing a forum for community members to vocalize their opinions and have them heard, largely unproductive. I also touched upon the issue of land rights in Madagascar and how this issue complicated these interactions even further.

In the Synthesis section, I considered three main themes in these findings: the importance of space, the relationship between the population and the planners, and the colonial history that led to the current state of land tenure in Madagascar. I found that space was a significant factor in the decision-making process and was identified in certain ways as a local asset. I found that it is being both manipulated and created during the current implementation of the project. I also analyzed the relationship between the population and the planners, arguing that participatory planning approaches were not used in any meaningful way during negotiations. I suggested that this contributed to feelings of doubt among the community members regarding the success of the project and the likelihood of receiving their promised compensation for leaving the land. I finally touched upon Madagascar’s history as a French colony and how this, along with traditional Malagasy land tenure culture and post-independence restructuring processes, has created an ambiguity that allows for government corruption and exploitation of the population.
This research is by no means exhaustive on the subject of development in Madagascar, or even on that in Mahajanga. There are numerous related questions that remain to be asked and investigated. Specific to Sôma Beach, I would like to get a more thorough idea of what community members (particularly those expelled from the beach) have experienced. A follow-up study examining the real results of the project, and its reception from community members and tourists, would be interesting. How has the local economy changed? How has the use of space changed around the Village Touristique and in other tourist hotspots in the city? Regarding the area’s physical geography, how have effects from ocean currents and cyclones merged to make the land what it is today? How well will efforts to address land change, such as the retaining wall, work in preventing further shoreline damage?

Looking more broadly at these development processes in other contexts, we might ask questions about how certain members of the population are heard and acknowledged by those in power based on their position in society. When might the planning actors use participatory-planning approaches in a more effective and substantial way, and to whom might they be listening?
Appendix I: Figures

Figure 1. Map of Mahajanga’s situation in relation to the rest of Madagascar. Source: Andriamitantsoa, 2009
Figure 2. Map of the fokontany of Mahajanga. 
Source: Andriamitantsoa, 2009
Figure 3. Diagram of planning and implementation actors.
Source: Isaac-Herzog, 2015

Map of Mahajanga downtown area.
Source: Google, 2015
Figure 5. Plan for Sôma Beach. At center is the esplanade, which extends in the form of a pier out over the water. 
Source: Iktus Ingénierie, 2014

Figure 6. Building materials from Daline’s deconstructed house, lying outside of her current house. 
Source: Isaac-Hertzog, 2015
Additional Figures. Photos of current stage of construction process.

Source: Isaac-Hertzog, 2015

Photo of the Bord de la Mer at mid-day.

Source: Isaac-Hertzog, 2015
Appendix II: Glossary

Aide-chauffeur  man on each bus who collects fares and calls out the stops

Bord de la Mer  boardwalk along the waterfront in center-city Mahajanga; a popular spot for Majungais and tourists to gather, particularly in the evenings

CUM  Commune Urbaine de Majunga; Urban Commune of Majunga; used in this paper to refer to the municipality as a decision-making entity

Fianakaviana  family

Fokontany  smallest unit of Malagasy government; comparable to a French “quartier” or American “neighborhood”

Hôtel de Ville  city hall

Iktus Ingénierie  engineering consulting firm hired by the national government

M. B. Consultant  architecture consulting firm hired by the CUM

PDS  Président de la Délégation Spéciale; appointed when a previous mayor was forced to step down; the current PDS is Tia “Daddy” Solofomanga

Heriniaina

Pousse-pousse  small tilted cart on wheels, pulled by a person, used as a form of transportation in some Malagasy cities, including Mahajanga

SMATP  Société Sino-Malgache de Travaux Publics; hired to do all construction

SRAT  Service Régional de l’Aménagement du Territoire (Regional Planning Office), in this case for the Boeny Region

Vazaha  foreigner; almost consistently refers to a white foreigner, and often specifically someone from France

Voirie  Public Works Department
# Appendix III: Interviewees

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<tr>
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<td>Worker (SMATP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daline Somanambina</td>
<td>Land Occupant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eric Chan-Ming</td>
<td>Owner (Karon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flavien Rabotovao</td>
<td>Engineer (Iktus Ingénierie)</td>
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<td>Director (SRAT)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Henri Razafindraibe</td>
<td>Head of Land Registry (CUM)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jean Claude Ramanampamanonjy</td>
<td>Architect, Director (M. B. Consultant)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lova Rakotomavo</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydiane Razafinmalala</td>
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<td>Mohamed Djabhan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Théophile Marotsara</td>
<td>Assistant to General Coordinator (CUM)</td>
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<td>Tia “Daddy” Solofomanga Heriaaina</td>
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References


