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Migration and challenges in Madagascar

Rovatiana Salema Andrianasolomahefa

E-mail: andrianasolomahefa.rovatiana.salema@stud.uni-nke.hu

Doctoral School of Public Administration Sciences, Faculty of Public Governance
and International Studies, Ludovika University of Public Service, Hungary

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Abstract

Madagascar faces unique and complex migration dynamics driven by environmental, economic, and social challenges. This paper explores both internal and external migration patterns, with a focus on the root causes, destinations, and socio-economic implications. Special attention is given to urbanization in mining towns, vulnerabilities of migrants, and the role of international and domestic policy responses. The study uses a multidisciplinary approach combining field research, statistical analysis, and policy review, drawing from scholarly and institutional references to provide a comprehensive understanding of migration in Madagascar. This comprehensive examination aims to provide policymakers, development partners, and scholars with insights to guide future interventions.

Keywords: migration, internal migration, external migration, migration in Madagascar, diaspora

Migráció és kihívások Madagaszkáron

Rovatiana Salema ANDRIANASOLOMAHEFA

Közigazgatás-tudományi Doktori Iskola, Közigazgatás-tudományi és Nemzetközi
Tanulmányok Kar, Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem, Ludovika, Magyarország

Összefoglalás

Madagaszkár sajátos és egymással szorosan összefonódó migrációs dinamikákkal küzd, amelyek kialakulásában a környezeti bizonytalanság, a gazdasági egyenlőtlenségek, a regionális fejlettségi különbségek, valamint a társadalmi és politikai átalakulások egyaránt szerepet játszanak. A tanulmány célja, hogy átfogó, multidiszciplináris elemzést nyújtson mind a belső, mind a nemzetközi migráció mozgatórugóiról, folyamatairól és következményeiről, ezáltal hozzájárulva a madagaszkári mobilitási mintázatok árnyaltabb megértéséhez. A belső migráció esetében kiemelt jelentőséggel bírnak az éghajlatváltozásból fakadó környezeti stresszhatások, mint az aszály, az áradások, a talajromlás és a ciklonok gyakoriságának növekedése. Ezek különösen a déli és nyugati régiókban élő közösségeket érintik, akik gyakran kényszerülnek elvándorlásra olyan városi területek felé, ahol több munkalehetőség, jobb közszolgáltatások és stabilabb megélhetés remélhető. A bányászati térségek, köztük Ambatovy, Ilakaka vagy Andilamena, különösen intenzív beáramlást tapasztalnak, mivel az ipari és kézműves bányászat gyors terjeszkedése rövid távú gazdasági előnyöket kínál. Ugyanakkor a települések rendkívüli társadalmi és környezeti sebezhetőséggel szembesülnek: az infrastruktúra túlterheltsége, az informális lakhatás terjedése, a munkaügyi kiszolgáltatottság, valamint a helyi közösségek és migráns csoportok közötti feszültségek egyre meghatározóbbak. A nemzetközi migráció vizsgálata feltárja, hogy Madagaszkár lakossága egyre növekvő arányban tekint külföldi lehetőségekre, különösen a regionális munkaerőpiacokra Mauritius, Réunion, Dél-Afrika, a Közel-Kelet, valamint Európa bizonyos országaiban. A mobilitás okai sokrétűek, a gazdasági motivációktól az oktatási célokon és családdegysítési törekvéseken át a személyes biztonsággal kapcsolatos megfontolásokig. A külső migráció ugyanakkor komoly

kihívásokat is rejt: a migránsok gyakran találkoznak bizonytalan foglalkoztatási formákkal, jogi kiszolgáltatottsággal, társadalmi marginalizációval, illetve a visszaélések és kizsákmányolás fokozott kockázatával. A hazautalások jelentős gazdasági súllyal bírnak, ugyanakkor a kvalifikált munkaerő elvesztése hosszú távú fejlődési problémákat vet fel. A tanulmány széleskörű módszertani alapokra támaszkodik, ötvözve a kvantitatív statisztikai elemzéseket, a terepkutatást, a kvalitatív interjúkat és a migrációs szakpolitikák összehasonlító értékelését. Az így létrejövő komplex kép lehetővé teszi a migrációt befolyásoló strukturális tényezők azonosítását, valamint a jelenlegi intézményi és politikai válaszok kritikai értékelését. A kutatás összességében olyan evidenciákon alapuló ajánlásokat fogalmaz meg, amelyek hozzájárulnak inkluzívabb, fenntarthatóbb és humánusabb migrációs politikák kialakításához Madagaszkáron és a tágabb régióban.

Kulcsszavak: migráció, belső migráció, külső migráció, migráció Madagaszkáron, diaszpóra

1. Introduction

Migration is a global phenomenon influenced by a variety of pushes and pull factors. In Madagascar, a confluence of environmental degradation, natural disasters, and economic hardship has made migration a coping mechanism for many. These conditions have led to significant population movements both within the country and across international borders. Migration in Madagascar is not merely a demographic trend but a reflection of deeper structural issues that need to be addressed through policy, planning, and community engagement. Addressing the drivers of migration in Madagascar is not only essential for national development but also critical for regional stability and international cooperation, given the transboundary implications of unregulated migration flows.

Madagascar, the fourth largest island in the world, is home to over 33 million people in 2023. Despite its rich biodiversity and cultural heritage, the country faces chronic development challenges, including widespread poverty, infrastructure deficits, and vulnerability to climate change. These challenges are compounded by political instability, weak institutions, and underinvestment in public services. The resulting economic stagnation and environmental stress have made migration a viable alternative for many Malagasy. Furthermore, Madagascar's geographic isolation has historically limited international investment and trade, further

entrenching systemic inequalities and hindering development that might otherwise reduce migratory pressures.

2. Internal migration in Madagascar

Madagascar's internal migration dynamics are heavily influenced by economic opportunities linked to natural resources, particularly in regions such as Ilakaka and Andilamena, known for sapphire and gemstone mining. These areas have experienced a rapid influx of internal migrants, primarily due to widespread rural poverty and declining agricultural productivity in other parts of the country (*Mueller 2020; Neimark 2023*).

Ilakaka, once a remote village, transformed rapidly into a bustling mining hub after the discovery of sapphires in the late 1990s. The "sapphire rush" drew thousands seeking employment and wealth, but the absence of infrastructure planning led to serious challenges. Overcrowding, poor sanitation, unregulated settlements, and lawlessness became prominent, mirroring gold rush towns historically observed elsewhere (*Sharp 1993; Andriamahefazafy 2020*). Environmental degradation quickly followed as forests were cleared for housing and mining, and waste runoff polluted nearby water systems (*Ranaivoson–Hervé–Razanaka 2018*). Andilamena has experienced a similar pattern. The town, located in Madagascar's Alaotra-Mangoro region, became another major migration destination after mining activities increased. Although local economies benefited temporarily, studies show that the social fabric of these regions was disrupted, with increases in informal labor markets, land conflicts, and poor governance responses (*Prestholdt 2023; Adepoju 2019*). The influx of male-dominated labor migration also raised concerns about gender-based violence and social instability.

Furthermore, internal displacement is not merely a function of economic migration but is often triggered by environmental stress. Cyclones and droughts, exacerbated by climate change, have led many from southern Madagascar to move inland in search of arable land or work. However, the environmental footprint of these settlements has outpaced the state's capacity to provide essential services such as clean water and sanitation (*Louis 2023; Gezon 2006*).

Critics argue that the state's neglect of these rapidly urbanizing zones reflects broader institutional fragility in Madagascar. There is limited central planning or policy enforcement in these peri-urban expansion zones, often resulting in an informal governance structure dominated by resource owners and mining syndicates (*Jeffery 2013; Mauremootoo–Richards–Watt 2003*).

3. International migration from Madagascar

Madagascar's international migration patterns reflect both historical colonial linkages and contemporary economic asymmetries. A significant proportion of Malagasy migrants relocate to France, Mauritius, and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These destinations are shaped by linguistic familiarity, labor demands, and diasporic networks (*Jeffery 2013*).

3.1 France

Due to colonial ties, France remains the most common European destination for Malagasy migrants. Migration to France is often framed as educational or professional but includes a growing number of low-skilled migrants facing bureaucratic hurdles and social marginalization. Many Malagasy youth pursue studies in France but remain post-graduation due to limited opportunities at home (*Bean–Brown 2023*).

Despite shared language, migrants often face challenges integrating into French labor markets. Stringent immigration policies, racism, and the informalization of labor—particularly in domestic care sectors have led to increasing precarity (*Graham–Nagar 2023*). Exploitation in informal work settings, especially among undocumented migrants, has been widely reported (*Neimark 2023*).

3.2 Mauritius

Migration to Mauritius is significant due to geographic proximity and shared Indian Ocean trade networks. While Mauritius has a well regulated migration system, it still presents risks of labor exploitation, especially in construction and domestic work. Migrants from Madagascar, often female, are recruited for low-wage work and face legal and institutional barriers to labor rights (*Louis 2023; Mauremootoo–Richards–Watt 2003*).

Recent reports indicate that although Mauritius maintains a democratic image, it has been criticized for overlooking labor conditions in its Export Processing Zones and for tolerating exploitative brokers (*Prestholdt 2023*).

3.3 Gulf States (e.g., Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar)

The Gulf region presents a starkly different profile. Malagasy migrants here are mostly engaged in domestic service roles under the Kafala system, which restricts workers' rights and movement. Human rights organizations have documented cases of physical abuse, withholding of wages, and passport confiscation among Malagasy domestic workers (*Adepoju 2019; Ranaivoson–Hervé–Razanaka 2018*).

Lack of legal literacy, gender vulnerability, and poor embassy support further exacerbate migrant precarity in these states. Many female migrants return with health and psychological trauma (*Andriamahefazafy 2020; Randrup 2010*).

These international migration patterns illustrate how structural inequalities, colonial legacies, and global labor markets intersect to shape Malagasy mobility. Migration is often seen as a survival strategy in the face of state neglect, climate shocks, and underemployment.

4. Socioeconomic push factors in Madagascar

Madagascar's persistent underdevelopment and fragile public infrastructure form a key driver of both internal and international migration. The nation ranks among the poorest in the world, with over 75% of the population living below the poverty line. Limited access to electricity (15%) and clean water (54%), combined with widespread food insecurity, contribute significantly to the *push factors* compelling migration (*Louis 2023; Ranaivoson–Hervé–Razanaka 2018*).

4.1. Infrastructure and service deprivation

Electricity and water scarcity severely restrict both rural and urban productivity. Rural electrification programs remain fragmented, and hydrological instability exacerbates seasonal shortages (*Mueller 2020*). Inadequate healthcare and education services further deepen inequality and prompt mobility toward better-serviced areas domestically or abroad (*Bean–Brown 2023; Andriamahefazafy 2020*).

4.2. Youth unemployment and informality

Youth represent a large demographic segment in Madagascar, but formal job opportunities remain sparse. The informal sector dominates employment, especially in mining, agriculture, and petty trade—areas characterized by low pay, exploitative conditions, and lack of labor protections (*Pretholdt 2023; Adepoju 2019*). These patterns have increased migration pressures, particularly among urban youth in Antananarivo and Tulear (*Mauremootoo–Richards–Watt 2003*).

4.3. Gender and vulnerability

Women in Madagascar face disproportionate burdens in migration contexts. They are more likely to engage in domestic work abroad or informal service jobs within urban Madagascar, often at the cost of family separation and exposure to abuse. The feminization of poverty, particularly in southern and coastal zones, correlates with rising out-migration to Gulf States and urban mining towns like Ilakaka (*Jeffery 2013; GrahamNagar, 2023*).

4.4. Land dispossession and agriculture decline

Land grabbing by elites and foreign companies has disrupted traditional agricultural livelihoods. This is especially pronounced in areas such as Menabe and SAVA, where land conflicts displace smallholder farmers, rendering them economically vulnerable and mobile (*Neimark 2023; Gezon 2006*). Migration thus becomes a survival response to forced economic displacement.

In combination, these socioeconomic stressors compound environmental risks and create a multidimensional crisis of immobility and desperation migration. Without systemic reform in infrastructure, governance, and social protection, migration flows will continue to rise under increasingly vulnerable conditions.

5. . Climate change and environmental stressors in Madagascar

Environmental vulnerability is a defining feature of Madagascar's migration landscape. The island's exposure to climate hazards cyclones, droughts, rising sea levels, and soil erosion has made large swaths of its population increasingly climate-displaced, often with no legal recognition or institutional support (*Mueller 2020; Adepoju 2019*).

Madagascar is hit by 3–5 cyclones annually, most recently Cyclone Batsirai in 2022, which displaced over 120,000 people and devastated coastal infrastructure. These recurring events displace residents temporarily, but due to inadequate reconstruction, many are forced into permanent relocation inland (*Louis 2023; Ranaivoson–Hervé–Razanaka 2018*).

The Grand Sud region is especially vulnerable to prolonged droughts. Between 2019–2022, hundreds of thousands faced famine-like conditions, forcing migration toward northern farming zones or mining towns. These are classic cases of *environmentally induced migration*, where slow-onset disasters degrade ecosystems until livelihoods collapse (*Prestholdt 2023; Neimark 2023*).

Illegal logging and slash-and-burn agriculture (tavy) have drastically reduced forest cover, affecting rainfall patterns and soil fertility. Madagascar has lost nearly 44% of its forest cover in the last 60 years, impacting rural food systems and compelling migration toward cities and foreign destinations (*Randrup 2010; Gezon 2006*).

5.1 Environmental inequity and governance failure

Despite being a biodiversity hotspot, Madagascar's environmental governance remains weak. International conservation efforts often exclude local voices and even displace communities

under eco-tourism projects (*Sharp 1993; Andriamahefazafy 2020*). Many affected people are rendered landless and without compensation, leading to forced economic migration.

The convergence of environmental fragility and poverty has created a *migration-environment trap*, where people move from one vulnerable ecosystem to another (e.g., rural drought zones to urban flood-prone slums). Without structural adaptation strategies, climate change will continue to be a multiplier of displacement in Madagascar.

6. Policy landscape and institutional gaps in Madagascar's migration governance

Despite mounting internal and external migration pressures, Madagascar's institutional response has remained fragmented, underfunded, and largely reactive. The country lacks a comprehensive migration policy, and coordination between ministries and municipalities is minimal (*Ranaivoson–Hervé–Razanaka 2018*).

6.1. National governance deficiencies

Madagascar's migration governance is administered by multiple ministries including Interior, Labor, and Social Affairs yet suffers from poor coordination. Migration management is often reactive, particularly in response to natural disasters, and lacks preparedness strategies for slow-onset environmental displacement such as drought-induced migration (*Mueller 2020; Graham–Nagar 2023*).

Although the country adopted a National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) in 2006, it focuses heavily on environmental conservation and fails to link climate adaptation with migration planning (*Neimark 2023*). Similarly, there are no legal definitions or protections for climate migrants or internally displaced persons (IDPs) under current legislation.

6.2. Weak protection for migrant workers abroad

The Malagasy state has been largely absent in protecting its diaspora, especially in the Gulf and Mauritius. Many labor migration arrangements are brokered informally, leaving migrants vulnerable to contract fraud, abuse, and trafficking. Reports indicate that Malagasy embassies often lack the capacity to provide shelter or legal aid for distressed nationals (*Jeffery 2013; Louis 2023*). Furthermore, bilateral labor agreements especially with GCC countries are either nonexistent or outdated, limiting the scope of regulation and accountability (*Adepoju 2019*).

6.3. Civil society and international actors

Due to state incapacity, NGOs and international agencies like IOM and UNHCR have taken on a larger role in migrant support and disaster response. For example, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has initiated programs in Antananarivo and Tulear aimed at

building resilience in climate-affected communities (*Louis 2023; Mauremootoo–Richards–Watt 2003*). However, donor dependency raises sustainability concerns. Long-term development planning remains weak, and data systems on migration flows are fragmented, making evidence-based policy formulation difficult (*Bean–Brown 2023*).

6.4. Governance at the local level

Urban municipalities like those in Ilakaka and Andilamena face migration-related urban stress (e.g., unplanned settlements, water stress), yet they operate with limited technical or financial capacity. Local leaders often rely on informal networks or traditional authorities to manage influxes of labor migrants (*Sharp 1993; Prestholdt 2023*).

This lack of vertical coordination between national, regional, and local government levels exacerbates migration-related vulnerabilities and undermines resilience efforts.

Migration in Madagascar is not a single-issue phenomenon. Rather, it results from the interplay of structural poverty like unemployment, weak infrastructure, and informal economies create chronic vulnerability (*Louis 2023*), or environmental instability as cyclones, droughts, and land degradation exacerbate livelihood collapse (*Mueller 2020; Neimark 2023*) and governance gaps, the absence of institutional frameworks lead to unmanaged internal migration and unsafe labor export (*Ranaivoson–Hervé–Razanaka 2018; Adepoju 2019*).

Internal migration to mining towns (Ilakaka, Andilamena) and international migration to France, Mauritius, and the Gulf states reflects a strategic survival response rather than opportunity-based mobility. Most migrants are pushed by desperation, not pulled by demand (*Jeffery 2013*).

7. Recommendations

The Malagasy government should develop a *national migration strategy* aligned with climate resilience and labor protection. This includes legal recognition of internal displacement due to environmental events.

Agreements with the UAE, Mauritius, and France must include clear protections, dispute resolution mechanisms, and embassy oversight (*Graham–Nagar 2023*).

Addressing rural outmigration requires investment in climate-resilient agriculture, youth entrepreneurship programs and community-based reforestation. These measures reduce “distress migration” by improving local retention.

Municipalities overwhelmed by migration must be empowered with urban planning tools, basic services expansion and inter-ministerial coordination funds (*Mauremootoo–Richards–Watt 2003*)

The Malagasy diaspora, especially in France, represents an untapped asset. Remittance channels, professional returnee programs, and diaspora bonds can link mobility to development (*Bean–Brown 2023*).

Madagascar's migration is a crisis of neglect and opportunity. By linking migration governance to environmental justice and economic reform, the country can transform movement into a tool for resilience rather than desperation.

Conclusion

Migration in Madagascar is both a symptom and a signal of entrenched poverty, environmental fragility, and weak governance, and a signal that systemic change is urgently needed. The country's internal and international migration flows are driven by a complex interplay of structural deprivation, environmental shocks, and aspirational survival, especially among marginalized youth and women.

From the overcrowded mining hubs of Ilakaka and Andilamena to the precarious labor corridors leading to France, Mauritius, and the Gulf States, Malagasy migration is largely a story of *forced mobility*. It is propelled less by choice and more by constraints of land scarcity, joblessness, climate volatility, and state inaction.

The absence of a unified migration framework, coupled with weak international labor protections and limited internal resettlement planning, has left migrants exposed to economic exploitation, social exclusion, and climate-related displacement.

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Appendix

Table 1 | International migration statistics from Madagascar (as of 2024)

Destination	Estimated Migrants	Migration Type	Key Challenges
France	~120,000	Historical/Colonial	Integration, unemployment, legal regularization
Canada	~6,500	Skilled/Student	Credential recognition, job mismatch
Germany	~4,000	Work/Family	Language barrier, underemployment
Mauritius	~12,000	Domestic labor	Informal work, legal protection issues
Gulf States	~10,000	Domestic labor	Exploitation, contract substitution
Comoros	~3,000	Circular/Education	Language integration, academic support
Seychelles	<1,000	Informal/Seasonal	Lack of formal status, small diaspora support

Source: <https://www.iom.int/countries/madagascar>

Table 2 | Internal displacement and rural-urban migration (2023–2024)

Trigger	Estimated Displaced	Region Affected
Cyclone Freddy (2023)	185,000	Southeastern Madagascar
Droughts (Grand Sud)	>1 million	Androy, Anosy
Mining Boom (Ilakaka)	50,000+	Ihorombe region

Source: <https://population.un.org/>

Table 3 | Migration drivers: National indicators

Indicator	Value (2024 est.)
Population with access to electricity	~15%
Access to safe water	~54%
GDP per capita	~\$543 USD
Youth unemployment (15–24)	~28%
Literacy rate	~64%

Source: <https://statbase.org/countries/mg/>

Table 4 | Statistics table (2024)

Category	Value
Total Population	29,452,714
Male Population	14,760,501
Female Population	14,692,213
Median Age (Total)	21.3 years
Median Age (Male)	21.1 years
Median Age (Female)	21.5 years
Population Growth Rate	2.18%

Category	Value
Birth Rate	27.6 per 1000
Death Rate	5.8 per 1000
Net Migration Rate	0.0 per 1000
Urban Population	40.60%
Urbanization Rate	4.26%
Mother's Mean Age at First Birth	19.5 years
Maternal Mortality	445 per 100k
Infant Mortality (Total)	37.5 per 1000
Infant Mortality (Male)	40.9 per 1000
Infant Mortality (Female)	34.0 per 1000
Life Expectancy (Total)	68.8 years
Life Expectancy (Male)	67.3 years
Life Expectancy (Female)	70.3 years
Total Fertility Rate	3.47 children
Gross Reproduction Rate	1.71
Contraceptive Prevalence Rate (2020)	49.70%

Source: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/madagascar/>

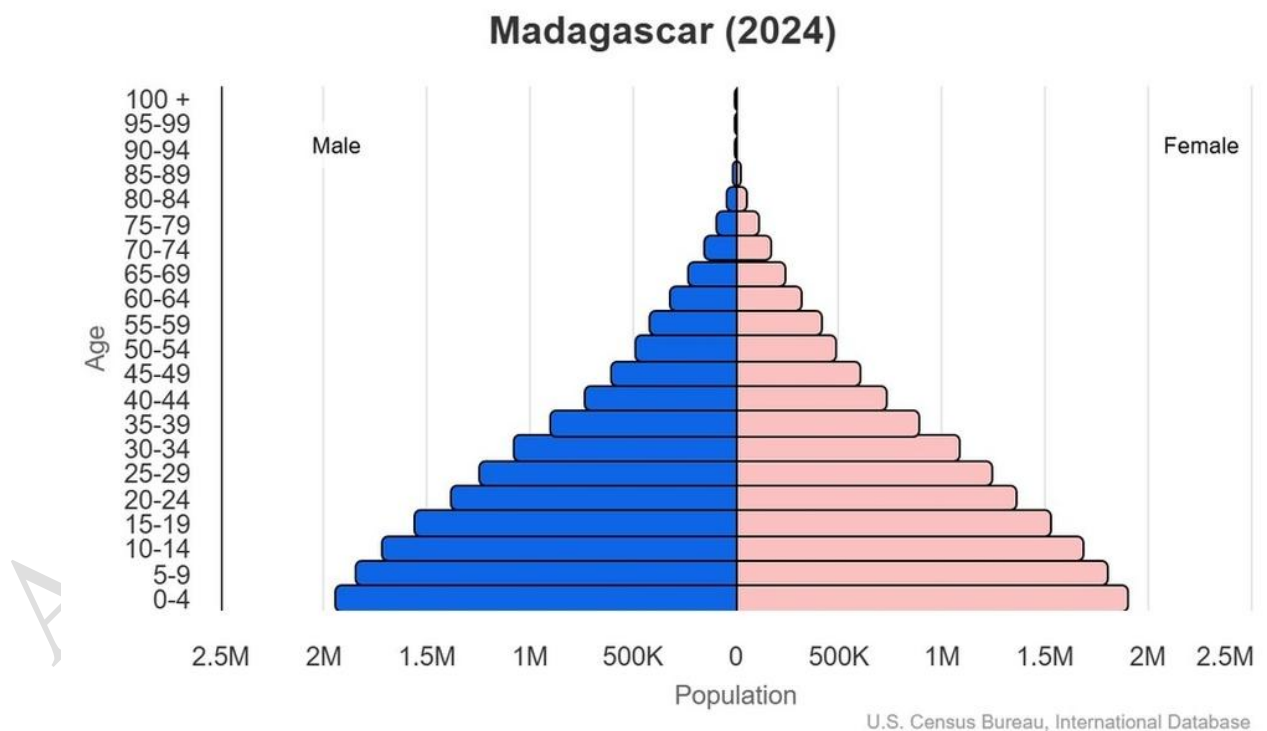


Fig. 1 | Composition of the population of Madagascar by gender in 2024

- Source: https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/idb/#/country?COUNTRY_YEAR=2024&COUNTRY_YR_ANIM=2024&IPS_SINGLE=MG&menu=popViz&submenu=pyramid

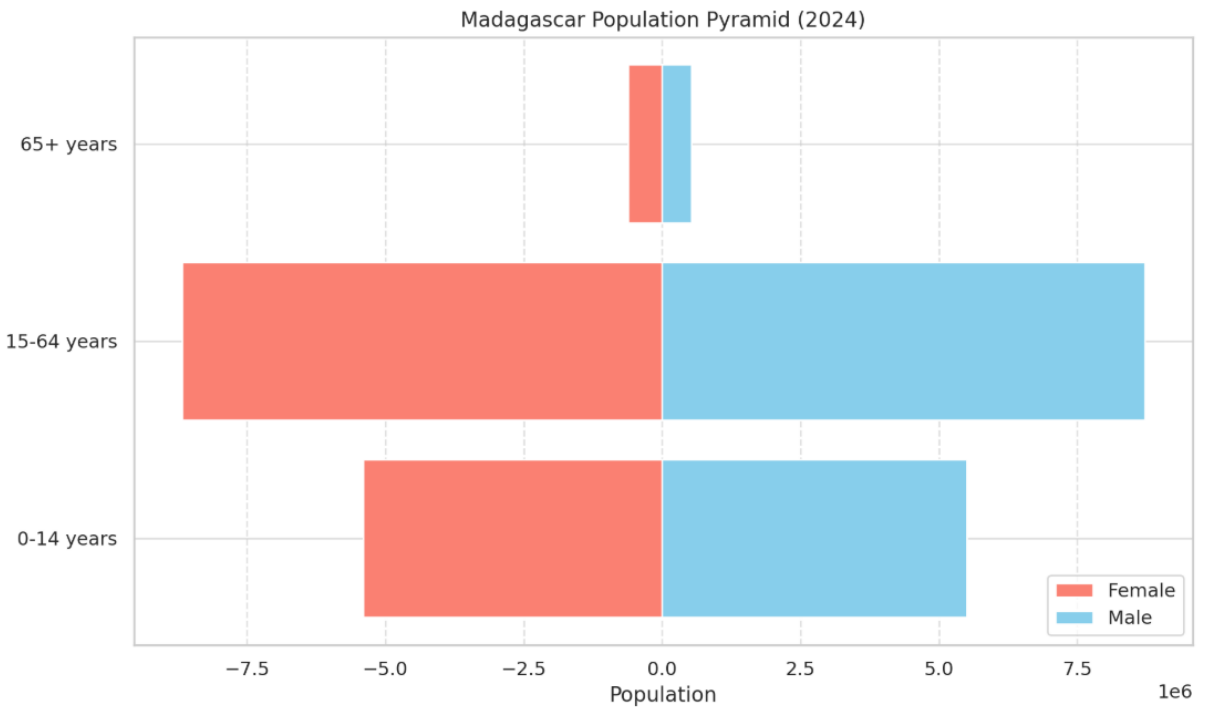


Fig. 2 | Composition of the population of Madagascar by gender and age

Source: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

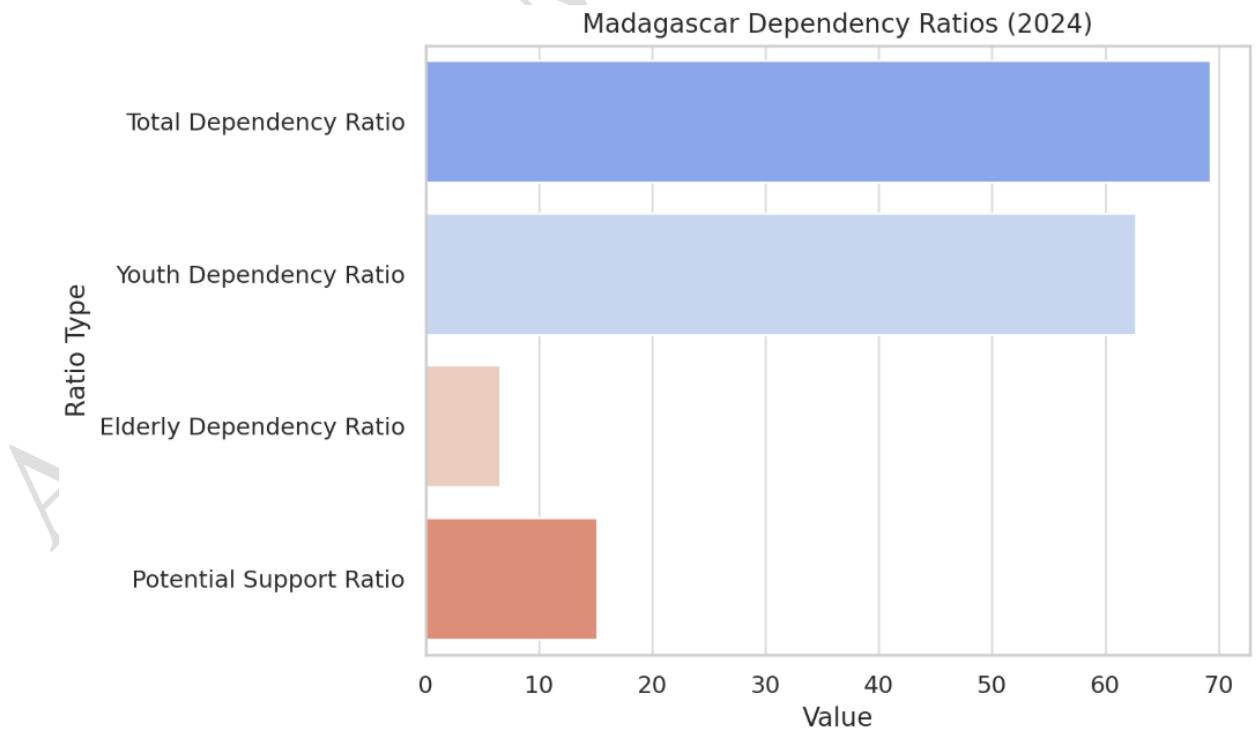


Fig. 3 | Madagascar's dependency ratios

Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.DPND?locations=MG>