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## Livelihood-based housing in Madagascar helps ensure sustainability

**H**abitat for Humanity Madagascar has adopted a livelihood-based strategy to ensure that housing interventions are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable and contribute positively to poverty reduction in the economically precarious communities in which Habitat works. These communities are cash poor, but rich in other resources that may be mobilized to assist families in meeting their housing needs. This strategy rests on three primary resources (human, social and environmental capital) and three secondary resources (traditional vernacular architecture, locally produced building materials and local skills).

### Primary Resources

- **Human Capital**

Throughout Madagascar, labor is abundant and gainful employment is scarce. Any economic intervention that seeks to be sustainable must allow communities to mobilize their human capital. HFH Madagascar prioritizes labor over equipment. By design, the projects are labor-intensive to ensure that families can leverage this critical and underutilized resource.

- **Social Capital**

Fihavanana (“the ties that bind”) is a key Malagasy idea that embraces a number of cultural values that bind communities together. Valin-tanana and Atero ka Alao are two powerful components of Fihavanana, mutual-help systems through which community members exchange goods and services to meet emergency or major needs. In valin-tanana, communities come together to ease each other’s burden for large jobs: “First we’ll turn your rice field; then we’ll turn mine.” Atero ka Alao is similar, but more individual and more precisely accounted: “When my daughter was married, you brought two chickens for the feast. When your daughter is married, I’ll repay you in kind.”

HFH Madagascar embraces this wisdom and social capital as a major resource available to families and communities to help them meet their housing needs. Members of Habitat’s partner community-based organizations participate in valin-tanana for such tasks as clearing land, stacking bricks for firing, digging foundation trenches, and carrying materials and water to job sites. Atero ka Alao allows a family to contribute materials or labor to other

families' homes as down payment or reimbursement for their own home.

- **Environmental Capital**

Deforestation is a real threat in Madagascar, as it is in all parts of the world struggling to cope with rapid urbanization and globalized timber trade. In recent decades, introduced eucalyptus species have significantly replaced native wood for construction purposes (and, even more significantly, in charcoal production). HFH Madagascar specifies woodlot species for projects to minimize the impact on native forests.

## Secondary Resources

- **Traditional Vernacular Architecture**

The lessons of generations of Malagasy artisans in transforming local materials into housing are embodied in the aesthetic of the architecture, from the depth of the foundations, to the thickness of the walls, the proportions of the openings and the pitch of the roof. Appreciating these lessons and putting them into practice is critical if socially, economically and environmentally sustainable housing is to be accessible to all. Conversely, a serious constraint on the access of Malagasy families to safe, healthy and affordable housing has been the devaluation of the traditional vernacular and locally produced building materials in favor of culturally anonymous “international” architecture and imported manufactured materials.

HFH Madagascar asserts the traditional vernacular architecture as a series of proscriptive limits or design guidelines within which homes must be designed if they are to receive Habitat financing. Design guidelines, including documentation of materials and methods, help to ensure integrity and simplicity of the design while allowing families the flexibility to build according to their needs, aspirations and capacities.

- **Locally Produced Building Materials**

The abundance of raw materials available in the highlands of Madagascar is reflected in the diversity of locally produced building materials. The choice of material, within

the limits imposed by the traditional vernacular, is typically based on a trade-off between affordability, durability and maintenance requirements. HFH Madagascar regards this as a choice best made by families in light of their own circumstances. Through the design guidelines, HFH Madagascar specifies locally produced materials to the extent practical. This policy has reduced the use of some imported materials (e.g., cement, imported from a different region of the country) and eliminated the use of others (e.g., iron roofing sheets, imported from Europe or Asia).

- **Local Skills**

By focusing on traditional vernacular architecture, with its reliance on locally produced materials and methods, HFH Madagascar's partner community-based organizations and their communities maximize the added value they contribute in the housing process. Thatchers, brick-makers and masons earn wages with which to feed their families, pay school fees and pay for health care. Because the livelihoods affected by this economic activity are typically in the non-formal economy—whose members tend to spend locally for local goods and services—the investments HFH Madagascar makes in these communities will have knock-on effects throughout the communities.

By intentionally focusing procurement throughout the value-chain of Habitat's housing program, HFH Madagascar aims to direct the economic benefits of the organization's work where they will help Habitat achieve the broader mission of ensuring decent housing for all.

HFH Madagascar has helped more than 600 Malagasy families in 17 communities build simple, decent homes. The Habitat families typically have household incomes between US\$45 and US\$90 per month (30 to 60 cents per person, per day).

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