

Mode Mad



ernising agascar

**To most people,
Madagascar is romantic,
exotic, tantalising and
unknown. For Sydney-born
Paul Porteous it has been
home since 2005.**

Helen McKenzie reports

cover story

Paul Porteous, University of Sydney Law and Economics alumni (BEc '85 LLB '88), lives and works in the capital of Madagascar, Antananarivo, ("Tanna" to locals) and says: "Most people hardly know anything about Madagascar."

Some days, Porteous wonders how much he knows. He tells this story about the gulf between 21st century Australia and rural peasant life on the island off the east coast of Africa. (Turn west at Perth and just keep going across the Indian Ocean.)

In remote villages in Madagascar, says Porteous, there is no running water and it is not uncommon for women to walk up to five kilometres, twice a day, to fetch water from the nearest stream or river. So Porteous was puzzled when the newly-installed water pump in a southern village was vandalised. Within three weeks it was irreparably broken. Who would do such a thing? Who would spit in the eye of progress and have so little sensitivity for the women?

"The women broke the pump for three reasons," says Porteous, Senior Advisor to Marc Ravalomanana, President of Madagascar. "Firstly, the walk to the stream was cultural – it was something their mothers and grandmothers had done. Secondly, the walk offered the women a chance to socialise. Third and not least, the walk also got them away from the men!"

The incident taught him a lot about different ways of seeing, different priorities and also about leadership. Porteous is an expert in leadership. As well as his Sydney University Law and Economics degree, Porteous has a Masters of Public Administration from Harvard where he was head teacher in the Social Leadership Department. He followed this with time in Human Rights law, a period with the UN in The Hague and he is also a driving force behind the Sydney Benevolent Society's Leadership Program.

All Photos
Paul Porteous



Along with “leadership” the word “engagement” keeps cropping up in Porteous’s conversation; so too does the classification of issues as either “technical” or “adaptive.” Porteous says leadership is about “going to the issues people flee from.”

Meeting amid a laidback Saturday morning crowd at a café-gallery in Chippendale, Porteous is instantly identifiable. Sporting a neatly-trimmed beard and an immaculately pressed white shirt, he is the only one behind a laptop – ready for work. It’s only later, after experiencing his enthusiasm, engagement and zeal, that the café’s name – The Mission – seems apt and almost funny.

Porteous’ first contact with Madagascar was a direct leadership consultancy with the President for a few weeks,

in July 2005. Longer-term commitment soon followed.

“The President was prepared to challenge and be challenged and he wanted us to build an exceptional leadership team not just of Ministers but the whole of government and eventually at every level in the country,” Porteous says.

“In a way, the work found me, not the other way around. Since my studies at University in political economy and international law, my focus has always been on human development and wanting to achieve real impact and results. Madagascar was about combining the big picture with practical on-the-ground results, where one moment you are dealing with illiterate villagers and the next, the head of an international organisation.”



The President was prepared to challenge and be challenged

Terraced farming is unique to Madagascar: seen nowhere else in Africa.

Right: Paul Porteous and President Marc Ravalomanana

and another that sounds as if it is swearing, says Porteous.) Eighty per cent of the flora and fauna is unique to the island whose length is approximately the distance between Melbourne and Brisbane.

Only one per cent of the original forest still stands but Madagascar has mining (bauxite, ilmenite and nickel) potential that is slowly being realised.

It has an extreme landscape, from desert in the south to monsoonal wetlands in the north and has an extreme climate to match: in 2006 drought followed by famine in the south affected more than 350,000 people. Earlier in 2007 seven successive cyclones killed 85 people and destroyed 1500 houses.

Madagascar's religious beliefs are also unique: split mainly between Catholic and Protestant (45 per cent) with five per cent Moslem, 50 per cent of the population follows traditional beliefs that include elaborate and recurring funeral ceremonies and reverence for the zebu (the island's native cattle.)

"All over the country you see these little European-style churches," says Porteous. "I've never seen so many."

Despite the presence of French colonisers, from 1895 to 1962, much of Madagascar is still isolated and under-developed. On average a Malagasy woman has five children and the rural population has more than doubled since 1980. Each day nine women die in childbirth. Until recently the Malagasy did not know that malaria is a mosquito-borne disease. Most people live on less than \$1 a day. Soil degradation, mainly as a result of intensive farming, is such that the rivers run orange with silt, says Porteous.

The country's pre-French history is colourful and dramatic. For centuries Madagascar was home to a variety of pirates who plundered the region. Contact with Arab, Dutch, Portuguese, Russian, English and American traders was particularly significant in coastal areas. Sex slavery, shipwrecks and the exile of the indigenous royal family to Algeria in 1896 are a few features of the island's past.

Since independence, Madagascar could offer itself as a tumultuous test case for social ferment: social democracy, revolutionary socialism, military dictatorship; the



assassination of the third president, Richard Ratsimandrava; nationalisation of private enterprises and media censorship. In 1991 a street demonstration by striking workers ended with troops killing 30.

In December 2002, Marc Ravalomanana became president. He is also the country's wealthiest citizen, having made a fortune in dairy products. Ravalomanana is also popular: in the December 2006 election he won a 60 per cent majority; the nearest contender polled 10per cent. Porteous says the President "has a very strong results focus, is quick at decision making and is used to fixing problems." He also has a heart, recently stating: "My government and I will not rest until the major cause of death is old age. This is the Malagasy dream."

Madagascar is the planet's fourth largest island. Located 250kms off the east coast of Africa, it has a population of 20 million and was first inhabited around 1500 years ago. (And this is where it gets really fascinating, Porteous found: those emigrants were Indonesians, who had made an extraordinary sea journey around the periphery of the Indian Ocean.)

"It's unbelievable isn't it?" says Porteous, eyes sparkling with the fun of these facts and figures. "But if you look at the cultures around the Indian Ocean rim, you can see the influence of those people; and in Madagascar, they stayed."

The biodiversity of the island is mind-boggling: it has 223 of the world's 226 known species of frogs, more than 70 varieties of lemur (including one that sounds like a whale



Like elsewhere in the world, doctors are not keen on remote areas.

The country may have many problems but now, it also has a plan. In July 2007 the Madagascar Action Plan (MAP) was launched. The plan, written by Porteous and a core team of four, involved consulting around 6000 people. It pinpoints eight specific areas for action: responsible governance, infrastructure, education, rural development, health, economy, environment and national unification. The MAP details the level of improvement sought and the path to achieving these goals. Its lofty ideals and hopeful solutions may not sound groundbreaking until it is understood how material was collected and how the changes will be implemented.

Porteous says the strategy encompasses all the people “ranging from the Presidency and Cabinet right down to the village level. This is an approach that throws out the old ideas of a heroic leader with all the answers and instead focuses on the mindset and cultural change necessary to make progress. It goes beyond simply technical or skills-based solutions; rather, it is a dynamic approach engaging people to focus on underlying habits and practices which act as obstacles to progress.”

A good example of what Porteous is talking about is the health system. In the recent past, political brownie points were scored by the building of health centres. The reality is, however, that like elsewhere in the world, doctors are not keen on remote areas. In Madagascar doctors are poorly paid – taxi driving can be more lucrative.

Says Porteous: “We started looking at what was actually needed in remote communities. We found pregnancy-related services are really important: what we really need are midwives and nurses. They can provide a basic service; most are women, so the women are more likely to go to them. We can train them and source them locally so they will actually want to live in their own areas. That is a really sensible outcome.”

Solving problems in this way has other positive benefits, says Porteous. Organisations such as the European Economic Union and the World Bank welcome the approach. “The donors start to get excited about it,” he explains. “They say this fits with the delivery of services on the ground – which is an area of great frustration. Suddenly you’ve got services on the ground. This is a change of mindset. It is a new look at how to make progress.”

The education and supply of nurses and midwives is what Porteous would call a “technical” solution. The “on the ground” medical staff are knowledgeable about malaria, hygiene and nutrition, increasingly have access to contraception for distribution and are able to talk about how to control sexually transmitted diseases.

At the moment Madagascar’s HIV infection rate, at one per cent, is among the lowest in the world, due almost entirely to its geographic isolation (neighbouring South Africa is at 30 per cent). “The HIV campaign is very strong and well supported – people are aware of AIDS/HIV,” he

Above:
Madagascar’s
traditional building
style: brick and tall



children (Sophie, three, and Daniel who has just turned one) Porteous says: "Having a family motivates you."

In early 2006 a large scale anti-malaria program linked to the supply of mosquito nets was in trouble: the Canadian Red Cross's offer of 600,000 nets was to be rejected, supposedly because of an unsatisfactory design. When the World Health Organization (WHO) made contact, Porteous used his position to actively intervene and make headway through what he calls "the bureaucratic museum."

The problem turned out to be more to do with someone within the country wanting to sell nets to the government. Canada made its donation and a WHO Geneva staffer referred to Porteous as "St Paul".

Madagascar's past colonial and socialist governments have left a legacy of stultifying bureaucracy – a major obstacle to change, Porteous has found.

"In those systems, you stick your head up, you get it chopped off. You want people who are essentially going to do as they're told. The French in particular brought in the science of bureaucracy. It was built on the idea that process was above everything. The concept was that if you could reduce complex issues and deal with them in a scientific way, then you would be able to deal with the bigger problems. They brought in the Organisational Chart, which was almost like the Holy Grail and is still within many government ministries. It defines the ministry and that's the box you're in."

Early in his term, President Ravalomanana recognised that will and enthusiasm alone would not bring about changes. He found, according to Porteous, that "the system almost worked against getting results. As an entrepreneur he brought real flair and fast decision making, but things were not improving. He wondered why the country wasn't fixed yet."

Ravalomanana looked internationally for ideas and was attracted to the work being done by Porteous and his colleagues at the Centre for Social Leadership at Harvard. For Porteous and his team, the presidential appointment to produce the MAP ensured they were welcomed at the highest levels of government.

says. "QMM – the mining company operating at Fort Dauphin – is introducing separate quarters for the foreign miners and implementing a rule forbidding them from having sexual relations with the locals."

According to the action plan, "The population of Madagascar has doubled over the past 25 years. In some areas of the country, seven per cent of 16-year-old girls have already had a child. There is an unmet demand for family planning with at least 24 per cent of women in relationships saying they would use contraceptives if they were available."

When addressing family planning, however, there is also an "adaptive" issue at play, says Porteous. It is customary for the father of the bride to wish Malagasy newly-weds "seven sons and seven daughters." The country's demographic statistics suggest that many try hard to make that wish a reality. In rural areas the fertility rate is between five and eight children per woman.

At the marriage of his own daughter, President Ravalomanana deliberately wished the couple: "A healthy life together and three children."

More formally, he says: "I have tried to change the way everyone in my country thinks about raising families because I have a strong personal commitment to balancing population growth with sustainable natural resources."

Like the President, Porteous has found that personal engagement in issues is unavoidable. As a husband (to Australian musician Sally Melhuish) and father to two small

Brickworks workers (top left); the racial mix of Malagasy kids is obvious (centre); Ring-tailed Lemurs (right)





Said Porteous: “They talked about cultural issues that are never talked about openly. ‘Fi Havanaana’, for instance, which binds communities. It’s about how you look after each other. The Australian equivalent would be mateship (and you can’t criticise mateship).

“In the leadership work you try to separate the good parts from the bad. Hold on to the caring for each other component and let go of the other parts, like jealousy and nepotism.”

The leadership gospel is the same at all levels: engagement, communication and working through issues. There is no place for steamrollers. It is about asking a lot of questions in order to come up with an understanding of the obstacles to progress.

In this context other cultural customs arose such as a burial tradition practised in the south. Here, wealth is measured in the number of zebu (cattle) owned by a family. To honour the death of the head of the family, however, all the zebu they own are slaughtered (to provide appropriate status on the other side). This is a direct clash between traditional values and progress, says Porteous, but “going in and saying – this is right or this is wrong – doesn’t work.”

In what must be seen as rising confidence in Madagascar’s efforts, in October, the EU (European Union) announced it would double its development assistance to more than 500 million Euros over the next four years. Madagascar has also caught the attention of Jeffrey Sachs, head of the UN Millennium Goals Project, with whom Porteous has worked. Sachs, noting the cultural change elements taking place so rapidly in the country, has predicted that Madagascar “will be the most exciting place on the planet for the next two years.”

Meanwhile, the passionate proponent of leadership ideals has another life. Sally Melhuish, Porteous’s wife of 20 years, is a musician and co-artistic director of baroque ensemble, Salut! So, for about a month each year the family leaves whichever international pressure point they are living in and slips into the refined world of 18th century court music.

Porteous says he relishes this time when his role is of “roadie for the company and hands-on dad to two children.” He means this in both a technical and adaptive way, of course. **SAM**

See more of Paul Porteous's photographs at www.paulp.smugmug.com



“He was able to call his ministers to account; we were working with the Cabinet, training the ministers in leadership development,” says Porteous. “We did everything in an open and transparent way. We put ads in the papers and interviewed for the Secretary and Director General positions. Hundreds of people were processed and their applications gone through. It used to be that they just put in who they wanted. It was a real shake-up for the system.”

From ministerial level they then moved to the regions, training 22 Chefs de Region; then 122 district level officers. The next layer of authority was 17,500 Heads of Villages: 100 of the best became facilitators.

The Village Chiefs were invited to the capital, Antananarivo. For many it was their first time away from their villages. The team asked them: what is blocking progress? What actions could be taken to make a difference?

Stark contrasts: (above left) aftermath of two year drought; (centre) in the north – rice harvest; (left) malnourished children receive treatment in hospital ward