



## **UNEQUAL RELATIONS AND MADAGASCAR'S STRUGGLE FOR SOVEREIGN PROGRESS UNDER NEO- IMPERIALISM**

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### **Abstract**

*This article aims to analyze how unequal relations under contemporary neo-imperialism shape Madagascar's struggle for sovereign progress despite formal political independence. The study employs a qualitative case study approach, drawing on documentary analysis, discourse materials, and 15 semi-structured interviews with national policymakers, representatives of international actors, and civil society leaders. The analysis is guided by a theoretical framework grounded in neo-imperialism and dependency theory, combined with a conceptual framework that examines the interaction between structural global hierarchies, mechanisms of external influence, and domestic institutional vulnerability. The central hypothesis is that Madagascar's limited sovereign progress results not primarily from the absence of independence, but from the persistence of structural dependency reinforced by external financial, diplomatic, and normative mechanisms interacting with internal institutional constraints. The findings confirm this hypothesis, showing that external actors exert significant influence through development financing, investment arrangements, governance reforms, and policy discourses, particularly in strategic sectors such as natural resources, energy, and development planning. Weak administrative capacity, limited negotiation expertise, and fragile decentralization further expose domestic institutions to external dominance. These dynamics produce a persistent gap between formal sovereignty and effective decision-making autonomy. The study concludes that advancing sovereign progress in Madagascar requires strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing transparency and negotiation mechanisms, and reorienting development strategies toward domestically defined priorities rather than externally imposed frameworks.*

**Keywords:** Neo-imperialism, Dependencies, Sovereignty, Institutional Vulnerability

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## **Introduction**

Madagascar's pursuit of sovereign progress continues to unfold within a system of unequal relations that shapes its political choices, economic structures, and position in the global order (Walter, 2022). The country's historical engagement with powerful external actors has produced enduring asymmetries that continue to influence its capacity to exercise autonomous decision-making (Machado, 2007). Campbell (2024) demonstrates that these asymmetries did not disappear with the withdrawal of colonial administrations but were instead reconfigured into new forms of political and economic dependency. Randrianja (2022) further shows that post-independence institutions in Madagascar evolved within frameworks shaped by external expectations, limiting the emergence of fully autonomous governance structures. Cantoni et al. (2025) reinforces this perspective by highlighting how Africa's integration into global economic networks reproduces ecological and economic imbalances that constrain domestic development choices. Together, these studies indicate that Madagascar's struggle for sovereign progress must be understood within a broader system of unequal relations that persist under contemporary neo-imperial arrangements.

Madagascar constitutes a particularly significant case for examining neo-imperial dynamics because of its strategic geopolitical position, resource endowments, and historical trajectory of external engagement. Downum's early analysis (1942) shows that the island's location in the Indian Ocean placed it within competing imperial interests long before independence. This strategic positioning has continued into the post-colonial period, making Madagascar a site of sustained attention from external powers seeking economic, political, and maritime influence. Ramsamy (2021) illustrates how foreign involvement during Malagasy political crises reflects broader

patterns of external intervention that shape domestic political outcomes. Plange and Alam (2023) argue that such patterns are not anomalies but expressions of transformed imperial power, operating through diplomatic, economic, and institutional mechanisms rather than direct territorial control. As a result, Madagascar offers a critical case for understanding how sovereignty is negotiated, constrained, and reshaped under neo-imperial conditions rather than simply exercised as a formal attribute of statehood.

Economic development in Madagascar remains closely tied to external actors, reinforcing structural dependency and limiting national policy autonomy. Cantoni et al. (2025) argue that unequal ecological exchange continues to define relationships between African resource-exporting states and wealthier economies, constraining local value creation and long-term development. Higgins-Desbiolles (2022) similarly demonstrates that sectors promoted as engines of growth, particularly tourism, often reproduce dependency by privileged foreign capital, expertise, and narratives of modernization. Suppla et al. (2023) add that these economic relationships are accompanied by ideological and institutional pressures that align domestic policies with externally determined development models. In the Malagasy context, such dynamics position development strategies within global systems where decision-making power remains concentrated outside the country, making sovereign progress contingent upon navigating deeply unequal economic relationships.

Governance reforms in Madagascar further illustrates how neo-imperial influence operates through institutional channels. Walter (2022) shows that decentralization initiatives intended to enhance accountability and participation often struggle because administrative structures inherited from earlier political orders continue to dominate public administration. In the education sector, Emynorane et al. (2025)

find that reform agendas closely mirror external models rather than locally grounded needs, reinforcing dependency in knowledge production and policy design. Razakamaharavo and Féron (2024) demonstrate that local governance processes are embedded within multi-scalar networks of influence in which international actors shape political agendas and opportunities. These findings highlight a persistent tension between efforts to strengthen autonomous institutions and the continued influence of global frameworks that reflect neo-imperial configurations of power.

Madagascar's experience reflects broader patterns across post-colonial Africa, where formal independence has not eliminated structural inequalities embedded in global political and economic systems. Juan (2021) argues that political sovereignty alone is insufficient when economic and institutional structures continue to favor external powers. Urbano (2019) similarly notes that many African states entered independence without transforming the deeper arrangements that embedded them within global hierarchies. Todisoa (2025) shows that Madagascar exemplifies this condition of incomplete decolonization, where post-independence reforms failed to fundamentally alter the institutional and economic foundations inherited from the colonial era. These analyses underscore why Madagascar's struggle for sovereign progress must be examined as part of a wider pattern of neo-imperial continuity rather than as an isolated national experience.

Resource governance provides a particularly revealing domain for analyzing unequal relations in Madagascar. Lassou et al., (2019) demonstrates that extractive activities during the colonial period were organized around foreign interests, establishing economic patterns that persist in contemporary agreements. Cantoni et al. (2025) show that similar dynamics continue under modern investment regimes, where benefits are disproportionately captured by external actors. van Vliet et al.

(2025) further argue that contemporary energy partnerships can deepen dependency by positioning foreign states as indispensable sources of expertise and financing. In Madagascar, such arrangements embed neo-imperial relations within national planning processes, making sovereignty over natural resources contingent upon external strategic interests.

The geopolitical environment surrounding Madagascar further amplifies these constraints. Andriamiharisoa (2022) shows that disputes over small island territories in the region reflect broader geopolitical maneuvering by powerful states across the Indian Ocean. Nicholson (1998) explains that contemporary power transitions increasingly rely on economic, diplomatic, and normative tools that replicate earlier imperial hierarchies. Cantoni et al. (2025) reinforces this infrastructure argument by documenting how emerging global actors reproduce asymmetrical relationships through financing and resource extraction. These developments position Madagascar within overlapping spheres of influence, each shaping the limits and possibilities of its sovereign decision-making.

Institutional fragility remains a central factor shaping Madagascar's vulnerability to unequal relations. Emynorane et al. (2025) link governance challenges to structural limitations that weaken accountability and policy implementation. Randrianja (2022) traces these weaknesses to institutional arrangements originally designed for control rather than national empowerment. Ramsamy (2021) shows that periods of political instability further increase external leverage, as foreign actors often intervene during moments of domestic crisis. These findings indicate that sovereignty in Madagascar is shaped by the interaction between internal institutional constraints and persistent external pressures.

Finally, neo-imperial influence operates not only through material mechanisms but also through ideological and epistemic structures. Suppla et al. (2023) argue that dominant global

knowledge systems shape governance and development discourses in ways that privilege Western paradigms. Nicholson (1998) notes that international institutions embed norms reflecting the interests of powerful states, shaping national decision-making even without direct intervention. Higgins-Desbiolles (2022) demonstrates how cultural representations within global tourism reinforce hierarchical relationships between post-colonial societies and external actors. These dynamics show that Madagascar's struggle for sovereign progress is shaped as much by ideas and narratives as by economic and political constraints.

Building on these theoretical insights, this study aims to examine how neo-imperial dynamics constrain Madagascar's pursuit of sovereign progress through the interaction of structural dependency, mechanisms of external influence, and domestic institutional vulnerability. Grounded in neo-imperialism and dependency theory, the study specifically seeks to explain how global hierarchies and internal governance limitations jointly shape policy choices, development trajectories, and the gap between formal sovereignty and effective decision-making autonomy in Madagascar.

### **Analytical Framework**

This study analyzes Madagascar's pursuit of sovereign progress under contemporary neo-imperialism through an analytical framework structured around three interrelated dimensions: structural dependency, mechanisms of external influence, and domestic institutional vulnerability. Rather than treating sovereignty as a fixed legal condition, the framework conceptualizes it as a relational and contested process shaped by the interaction between global power structures and domestic governance capacities. This approach is grounded in neo-imperialism and dependency theory, which together emphasize

how post-colonial states remain embedded in asymmetric global systems despite formal political independence.

The first dimension, structural dependency, refers to the enduring position of Madagascar within global economic, political, and knowledge hierarchies that constrain the range of viable policy options available to the state. Drawing on dependency-oriented perspectives, this dimension focuses on how development pathways are shaped by externally defined models, investment regimes, and patterns of resource extraction that limit domestic value creation. Structural dependency is treated here not as a temporary condition but as a systemic context within which national decision-making occurs (Campbell, 2024). It establishes the background conditions that shape how sovereignty is exercised, negotiated, or constrained, particularly in sectors such as natural resources, infrastructure, tourism, and development financing.

The second dimension, mechanisms of external influence, captures the concrete processes through which powerful external actors shape domestic policy outcomes without direct territorial control. In line with neo-imperialism theory, influence is understood to operate through financial leverage, diplomatic engagement, international norms, and sector-specific partnerships (Plange & Alam, 2023). This dimension directs analytical attention to how donor conditionalities, investment agreements, governance reforms, and development discourses translate structural asymmetries into everyday policy constraints. Rather than assuming uniform or coercive intervention, the framework allows for variation in influence, recognizing that external power is often exercised through negotiation, technical assistance, and institutional embedding that normalize unequal relations under the language of partnership and modernization (van Vliet et al., 2025).

The third dimension, domestic institutional vulnerability, focuses on how internal governance arrangements mediate the

impact of external pressures. This dimension examines the capacity of state institutions to formulate, negotiate, and implement policy autonomously in the context of limited administrative resources, fragmented authority, and technical dependence. Institutional vulnerability is not treated simply as weakness, but as a relational condition that creates openings for external influence (Razakamaharavo & Féron, 2024). By analyzing decentralized processes, sectoral governance arrangements, and bureaucratic capacity, this dimension highlights how internal institutional dynamics condition the extent to which external actors are able to shape national priorities and outcomes.

Crucially, the framework emphasizes the interaction among these three dimensions rather than treating them as independent variables. Structural dependency shapes the environment in which external influence becomes effective, while institutional vulnerability determines how such influence is absorbed, resisted, or reproduced within domestic governance processes. Sovereign constraints emerge at the intersection of these dimensions, explaining why formal independence does not necessarily translate into effective policy autonomy (Todisoa, 2025; Urbano, 2019). This interactional perspective allows the study to move beyond deterministic accounts of external domination or purely internal explanations of governance failure.

By operationalizing neo-imperialism through these three analytical dimensions, the framework provides a structured lens for examining how sovereignty is practically negotiated in Madagascar. It enables the study to trace how global hierarchies are translated into policy constraints, how external actors exert influence across strategic sectors, and how domestic institutions mediate these pressures. In doing so, the framework directly informs the empirical analysis and supports the study's broader



aim of explaining the persistent gap between formal sovereignty and effective decision-making autonomy in Madagascar.

## **Method**

This study uses a qualitative case study approach, treating Madagascar as a bounded case to examine how neo-imperial influence and unequal relations shape sovereign decision-making. The approach is explanatory rather than generalizing and focuses on the interaction between structural dependency, external influence, and domestic institutional dynamics. Madagascar was chosen purposively because it reflects the convergence of resource dependency, geopolitical significance, and institutional legacies of colonial rule. The analysis concentrates on analytically relevant arenas where these dynamics are most visible, including extractive and energy agreements, governance reform episodes such as decentralization, and selected international partnerships and donor programs. This focused design allows an in-depth examination of how sovereignty is negotiated in practice across key sectors rather than being treated solely as a formal legal condition.

Data are drawn from documentary sources, semi-structured interviews, and public discourse materials in order to capture both formal arrangements and informal practices. Documentary evidence includes policy papers, investment and donor agreements, parliamentary records, and civil society reports, while interviews were conducted with 15 key informants who possessed direct knowledge of policy formulation and external engagement. These informants include senior government officials involved in foreign affairs and development planning, representatives of international organizations and donor agencies, and leaders of civil society organizations. The analytical framework is implemented through three interconnected dimensions: structural

dependency, mechanisms of external influence, and domestic institutional vulnerability. These dimensions guide data coding and interpretation across all sources. Findings from one source are systematically compared with findings from others, allowing interview accounts to be assessed against official documents and public narratives. This triangulated analysis makes it possible to identify how neo-imperial dynamics operate across sectors and how domestic institutions mediate external pressures, thus strengthening the credibility of the study's conclusion.

## **Discussion**

### **Structural Dependency and External Influence in Madagascar**

The results show that Madagascar's position in the global economy continues to be shaped by long-standing structural inequalities that limit its capacity to direct development on its own terms. Across documentary sources and interviews, economic arrangements consistently appear tilted toward external interests, particularly in extractive industries where foreign firms exercise decisive influence over key contractual and operational decisions. This finding aligns with Cantoni et al. (2025), who argue that African states remain embedded in systems of ecologically unequal exchange in which the benefits of extraction largely accrue outside the continent. Interview participants described investment contracts as structurally fixed, leaving little room for renegotiation once agreements are concluded, a pattern that closely mirrors the constraints observed in primary documents. These dynamics indicate that dependency in Madagascar is not episodic or project-specific, but systemic in nature.

Importantly, the evidence shows that structural dependency extends beyond isolated sectors and operates across multiple domains of development. Tourism, infrastructure, and agricultural projects reveal recurring

dynamics in which external financing shapes not only technical implementation but also the definition of national priorities. In this study, national priorities are understood as policy objectives formally articulated by the state as central to development and governance, including resource exploitation, infrastructure expansion, energy development, and institutional reform. While these priorities are presented in policy documents as nationally defined goals, the findings demonstrate that their formulation and execution are frequently conditioned by external funding requirements, investment frameworks, and development models. This observation is consistent with Higgins-Desbiolles (2022), who notes that tourism often reproduces dependency through externally designed development pathways that appear beneficial while reinforcing structural subordination. Interviewees described these sectors as locked into externally defined models, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of reliance on foreign expertise and capital. Structural dependency thus emerges not only from unfavorable economic terms but also from the design of development trajectories themselves.

Historical materials further clarify how these contemporary patterns reflect deeper imperial and post-imperial legacies. Campbell (2024) demonstrates that Madagascar's incorporation into global systems during the imperial period established durable patterns of extraction and political hierarchy that persisted beyond formal independence. Several respondents emphasized that the country's post-decolonization "starting point" was already shaped by profound asymmetries, which continue to structure present-day engagements with external actors. Structural dependency is therefore the result of current policy choices alone, but a historically embedded condition that continues to shape Madagascar's development options and negotiating capacity.

These structural constraints are reinforced by mechanisms of external influence that shape domestic decision-

making without requiring direct political control. The findings show that donor agreements, investment frameworks, and governance reform programs frequently include financial and institutional conditions that narrow policy choices, particularly in strategic sectors such as natural resources and energy. Nicholson's argument (1998) that modern power no longer requires territorial control resonates strongly with respondents' experiences, as external actors were consistently described as unavoidable participants in national planning processes. Such mechanisms allow foreign states and institutions to shape outcomes while preserving the formal appearance of sovereign choice.

Interview data illustrates how external influence is experienced in practice. Policymakers described situations in which major projects were effectively determined before national consultations took place, placing Madagascar in a structurally disadvantaged negotiating position. Similar patterns are documented by Ramsamy (2021) in the context of French involvement during Malagasy political crises, where diplomatic pressure shaped mediation outcomes. Participants in this study frequently identified energy, mining, and maritime zones as areas where external leverage is most pronounced, indicating that influence is concentrated where strategic and economic stakes are highest.

Discourse analysis further reveals how external influence is legitimated and normalized. Donor communications regularly frame interventions as capacity building or technical support, while domestic political discourse emphasizes partnership and modernization. These narratives echo van Vliet et al. (2025), who shows that energy partnerships often present dependency as cooperation. Respondents noted that such framings cultivate expectations that external guidance is necessary and beneficial, rendering influence less visible and more acceptable. Through this combination of material leverage

and persuasive discourse, structural dependency and external influence operate together to shape what is officially recognized as a national priority in Madagascar, blurring the boundary between sovereign decision-making and externally conditioned development.

### **Institutional Vulnerability and Sovereign Constraints in Madagascar**

The findings show that domestic institutions in Madagascar often lack the capacity to negotiate, regulate, and oversee complex international engagements, creating structural openings for external dominance. Interviewees consistently pointed to administrative fragmentation, frequent leadership turnover, and limited technical expertise as factors that weaken the state's ability to assert and defend its policy priorities. This condition aligns with Randrianja's analysis (2022), which demonstrates that Madagascar's post-independence institutions were shaped by colonial administrative logics designed for control and extraction rather than autonomous governance. Institutional vulnerability therefore emerges not as an incidental weakness, but as a historically rooted condition that directly shapes how unequal relations are produced and sustained.

Decentralization policies provide a particularly clear illustration of this vulnerability. Documentary evidence and interview accounts indicate that reforms officially intended to empower local authorities often fail to translate into effective autonomy due to persistent financial constraints and continued central-level control. Emynorane et al. (2025) show that these gaps create space for external actors to intervene with funding, expertise, and program design, thereby shaping local governance outcomes. In the present study, local leaders frequently described situations in which externally funded projects determined development priorities, leaving local institutions with limited discretion. These findings suggest that

institutional limitations do not merely coexist with dependency but actively amplify it by making external involvement appear necessary and unavoidable.

The interaction between institutional weakness and external influence becomes especially visible in negotiations over large-scale investments. Respondents noted that certain ministries lacked the legal, financial, or technical expertise required to evaluate long-term agreements, particularly in extractive industries, energy projects, and infrastructure development. As a result, decision-makers often rely on external consultants or donor-provided expertise, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations. This observation is consistent with Razakamaharavo and Féron (2024), who show that local political dynamics in Madagascar are shaped by networks of external incentives and support. Institutional vulnerability thus functions as an active channel through which neo-imperial dynamics are translated into concrete policy outcomes.

These institutional conditions directly shape the nature of sovereignty in Madagascar. The findings reveal a persistent gap between formal sovereignty, defined as legal independence and international recognition, and effective sovereignty, understood as the practical capacity to make autonomous decisions. Interviewees repeatedly emphasized that sovereignty exists "in principle, but not in the daily reality of decision-making." This supports Juan's argument (2021) that sovereignty in post-colonial states is relational rather than absolute, shaped through ongoing interactions with more powerful external actors. In Madagascar's case, sovereignty is best understood as conditioned sovereignty, meaning that decision-making authority is formally retained but substantively constrained by external financial leverage, institutional frameworks, and governance norms.

Documentary evidence reinforces this interpretation. Several policy directives, development strategies, and

investment commitments examined in this study reflect priorities that did not originate solely within national institutions. Similar patterns are identified by Urbano (2019), who argues that many African states achieved formal independence without disrupting the deeper structures of external control. In Madagascar, sovereign constraints are particularly evident in negotiations involving natural resources, maritime zones, and major development financing, where external approval or support often conditions policy outcomes.

Discourse analysis adds a final layer by showing how these sovereign constraints are publicly framed. Official speeches frequently emphasize partnership, modernization, and national ownership, while civil society narratives highlight exclusion from decision-making and demands for accountability. Todisoa (2025) characterizes Madagascar's trajectory as one of incomplete decolonization, a view echoed by respondents who perceive sovereignty as conditional upon external validation. Sovereign constraints are therefore experienced not only materially, through policy limitations, but also symbolically, shaping how both political elites and citizens understand Madagascar's position within global structures of power.

## **Conclusion**

The study demonstrates that Madagascar's struggle for sovereign progress is shaped by the interaction of structural dependency, external influence, and institutional vulnerability, resulting in a form of conditioned sovereignty that constrains effective decision-making autonomy despite formal independence. Strengthening sovereignty requires efforts to diversify economic partnerships, improve negotiation capacity in strategic sectors, and invest in institutional reforms that reduce reliance on external expertise. Policymakers should prioritize transparency in agreements, enhance technical

training for public officials, and support local governance structures that can better manage development initiatives without excessive external guidance. Civil society engagement and public scrutiny are also essential to building accountability and reducing the influence of competing foreign interests. Future research should examine how emerging geopolitical actors reshape Madagascar's options, assess the long-term impacts of specific investment agreements, and explore local resistance strategies that challenge neo-imperial dynamics. Expanding comparative studies with other African island states may also clarify whether Madagascar's experience reflects a broader regional pattern.

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