

In the world capital of vanilla production, nearly three out of four farmers say they don't have enough to eat

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Vanilla beans. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Madagascar, famous for its lemurs, is home to almost 26 million people. Despite the cultural and natural riches, Madagascar is one of the poorest

countries in the world. Over 70% of Malagasy people are farmers, and food security is a constant challenge. Rice is the most important food crop, but lately an internationally-prized crop has taken center stage: vanilla. Most of the world's best quality vanilla comes from Madagascar. While most Malagasy farmers live on less than \$2 per day, selling vanilla can make some farmers rich beyond their dreams, though these profits come with a price, and a new study illustrates it is not enough to overcome food insecurity.

In a paper published June 25, 2021 in the journal *Food Security*, a team of scientists collaborating between Duke University and in Madagascar set out to investigate the links between natural resource use, farming practices, socioeconomics, and [food security](#). Their recently published article in the journal *Food Security* details intricate interactions between household demographics, farming productivity, and the likelihood of experiencing food shortages.

The team interviewed almost 400 people in three remote rural villages in an area known as the SAVA region, an acronym for the four main towns in the region: Sambava, Andapa, Vohemar, and Antalaha. The Duke University Lemur Center has been operating conservation and research activities in the SAVA region for 10 years. By partnering with local scientists, the team was able to fine-tune the way they captured data on farming practices and food security. Both of the Malagasy partners are preparing graduate degrees and expanding their research to lead the next generation of local scientists.

The international research team found that a significant proportion of respondents (up to 76%) reported that they experienced times during which did not have adequate access to food during the previous three years. The most common cause that they reported was small land size; most respondents estimated they owned less than 4 hectares of land (

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