

MADAGASCAR

The city built from a garbage dump

Thousands lived on a smoking trash heap in Madagascar. A bricklayer taught them to break stone and build their own town.

WHERE Antananarivo

WHO Pedro Opeka, a priest and bricklayer who helped thousands build a new city

WHEN 1989 to 2026

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

In 1989, a man walked onto a vast hill of smoking trash in Madagascar. The hill stood just outside Antananarivo, the capital city. His name was Pedro Opeka. He was born in Argentina to refugee parents. As a young boy, his father taught him how to lay bricks. Now he was a priest on a distant island. What he saw on that hill broke his heart.

Thousands of human beings lived right on top of the dump. Families slept in tiny shacks made of torn plastic and wet cardboard. Barefoot children dug through rotten food and hospital waste with their bare hands. They fought stray dogs and wild pigs for scraps of food. Thick, foul smoke rose day and night from the burning trash.

People were coughing, sick, and starving. Most visitors turned away in disgust. Pedro could not sleep that night. He knew he could not walk away.

A promise in a cardboard hut

Pedro did not want to hand out free bread. He did not want to make empty speeches. He knew that handouts make people feel helpless. Free aid feeds people for a day, but it does not restore pride.

The next morning, Pedro walked back into the dump. He stepped inside a cardboard hut and sat on the dirt floor. He looked into the tired eyes of the parents. He

told them he had no money to give them. He said words alone would not help. But if they were willing to work, he would stand with them. Together, they would build a real future.

Pedro had noticed a steep hill of gray granite near the dump. He went to local friends and borrowed a small sum of money. He bought basic tools: heavy sledgehammers, pickaxes, shovels, and wheelbarrows. Then he returned to the families. He asked the fathers and mothers if they could swing a hammer. They said yes.

The next day, seventy people followed him up the rocky hill. They had never mined stone before. They only knew how to survive in the dirt. Pedro showed them how to look for natural cracks in the rock.

The stone city rises

The work in the open quarry was brutal. The sun was scorching, and the granite rock was stubborn. Men and women swung heavy hammers against the rock all day. They split huge boulders into cobblestones, foundation blocks, and gravel. Other workers dug red clay from the ground and baked sturdy bricks.

Pedro did not stand under a shade tree and shout orders. He picked up a sledgehammer and smashed stone alongside everyone else. His hands blistered and bled just like theirs. In the evenings, he showed young workers how to mix mortar. He taught them how to lay straight rows of bricks.

Every family helped build the houses. Slowly, the first small stone homes rose on the hillside. The houses had real tile roofs, clean wood floors, and bright walls. For the first time in their lives, children had a dry bed. They had a solid front door with a key.

They gave their new village a name: Akamasoa. In the Malagasy language, the word means “Good Friends.”

> **“It is not money that built Akamasoa. It was love, faith, work, and helping each other day by day.”**
>
> PEDRO OPEKA, SPEAKING TO AMERICA MAGAZINE

Word spread quickly across the garbage dump. More families put down their trash bags and picked up hammers. They cleared roads, dug water wells, and planted rows of trees. A place of death began to turn into a place of life.

Rules for a new life

Pedro set three clear rules for living in the village. The first rule was school. Every child had to attend class every single day. No child was allowed to beg or search for food in the trash. If parents kept a child from school, the family could not stay.

The second rule was work. Every adult had to contribute. Some worked in the stone quarry. Others became carpenters, paved streets, wove cloth, or

planted gardens. Everyone earned a fair wage for their labor.

The third rule was peace. No alcohol, illegal drugs, or violence were permitted. Neighbors who once fought over rotten scraps learned to live as friends. They elected street leaders to keep their neighborhoods safe.

1989	18	14,000+
the year the work began	villages built from stone	children in school today

Over thirty years, that first cluster of stone huts grew into eighteen villages. The families built thirty-seven schools, health clinics, pharmacies, and sports fields. They built libraries and community halls.

Today, more than twenty-five thousand people live in these clean, colorful stone towns. Over fourteen thousand children go to school every morning in neat uniforms. Many children of garbage pickers have graduated from high school and college. They have become doctors, nurses, accountants, and teachers.

More than half a million people across Madagascar have received medical care, food, or shelter from the community centers. The project even runs its own hospital.

In September 2019, Pope Francis visited Akamasoa. He stood in the stone quarry before thousands of singing workers. He told them their city proves that poverty is

not inevitable. They proved that human beings can lift themselves out of the dirt.

Pedro is now an old man with a long white beard. He still lives in a small room and wears dusty work shoes. Right next to the smoking dump stands a town of stone. It was built by the very hands that once dug through the trash.

How it unfolded

- **1970** Pedro arrives in Madagascar as a young missionary.
- **1989** He visits the garbage dump and starts Akamasoa with local families.
- **1990** Families open a granite quarry and build their first brick homes.
- **2004** Thousands of children attend new schools across several villages.
- **2019** Pope Francis visits the stone quarry and celebrates with the community.
- **2021** Pedro and Akamasoa are nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Most relief projects give away food and clothes. This community gave people heavy hammers and taught them to break stone. The families did not receive a city as a gift. They built every wall and paved every street with their own hands.

OUR TAKE

Charity feeds a person for one day, but honest work restores their dignity. Pedro showed that real change happens when you work beside people, not above them.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Work alongside people

Pedro did not stand back and give advice. He picked up a sledgehammer and smashed granite rock beside the families.

Try this: Help someone with a tough physical task this week by doing the work with them.

2 Build pride through effort

He avoided simple handouts because free gifts can make people feel powerless.

Try this: Give someone you help an active role so they take pride in what they achieve.

3 Turn waste into strength

He looked at a rocky, barren hill of granite and saw building blocks for clean homes.

Try this: Look at an unused tool or neglected space in your life and put it to good use this week.

4 Protect the habits of growth

He made school compulsory for every child without exception.

Try this: Choose one key habit for your learning or health and keep it every day this week.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

Poverty is not a fate. It is a wall that human hands can tear down.

Sources

Vatican News
The Akamasoa Association in Madagascar: a city of friendship and hope

America Magazine
The anti-poverty project Pope Francis will visit in Madagascar

Republic of Slovenia
Prime Minister Janez Janša nominates Pedro Opeka for the Nobel Peace Prize

Fact-check note: Population figures grow over time. Most news reports place the resident population between 25,000 and 30,000 people, with over 500,000 receiving temporary aid. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.