

# Fatma's Day:

## A day in the life of a Sudanese woman

**M**ORE THAN YEAR BEFORE the world wakes up to famine, in western Sudan life is tough and getting tougher. It is August 17, 1983, a real day in the life of one woman, 'Fatma'.

Fatma is 40 and lives in a large village in southern Darfur with her six-year-old daughter and a son, aged four. From a nomadic background, before her first marriage she helped her parents herding and planting. After marriage at 15 she lived a sedentary life, working with her husband in the fields. They later divorced and Fatma returned to her father's house. He lent her a cow so she could support herself by selling milk, and gave her three small plots with sandy soil outside the village.

A few years later she married a man who lives in a different village with his first and second wives. Fatma was unwilling to give up her house, land and independence so she stays in her home village and her husband visits every month. He has lent her two cows and occasionally brings her presents of millet, sugar and tea. But the main burden of looking after herself and bringing up two children is on Fatma's shoulders.

It is now the busy cropping season, so today Fatma gets up well before dawn. After praying, she milks the cow and sells the milk locally. With the 50 piastres (about 15 pence), from this she buys tea or other household goods from a nearby shop. Back home, she chops firewood and makes tea for herself and the children. By now it is 7.15 am and time to take her two donkeys to the wateryard to drink and to deliver the cows to the village herder, who will take them out to graze. Her house is about a quarter of a mile from the wateryard, where a diesel-driven borehole pumps up enough water for the village and many animals. For domestic water Fatma makes two trips, each time carrying four gallons in a tin on her head. Other villagers buy theirs from water sellers, who deliver it in barrel carts, but at ten times the price she pays at the wateryard, this is too expensive for Fatma.

Breakfast is next. Fatma's grain store is empty so the millet porridge is made from some brought by her husband, and eaten with a green leafy vegetable grown in the house compound. At 9.15 she leaves on her donkey for the half-hour journey to her fields. The children stay at home and have to look after themselves. During the growing season Fatma goes to her fields every day except the Muslim holy day of Friday, or if she has guests. When she is not in the fields there is always work around the house: the compound fence needs repairing and so does the hut's straw thatch. At the end of the dry season she sold a goat to buy straw and wood to patch the roof, but it is still cold and damp at night and the family has no blanket.

Fatma tries to grow more of the food that the family needs, such as okra, tomatoes, cucumber and melons, but the drought has made vegetable growing difficult. Relying on rainfall, most of her vegetables failed. Using money from selling milk, she buys vegetables, cooking oil, salt, sugar and tea in the market. In previous years of good yields there would have been a little grain to sell, but for three years she has hardly had enough to feed herself.

Cultivating a small area alone and primarily for her own food, Fatma cannot get a loan in exchange for part of the crop when it is harvested. Money-lenders would regard her as a high risk, and she is unwilling to take on loans because of the uncertainty of future harvests.

This year Fatma has planted only one plot because the previous harvest was so poor. Last year's yields from her three plots were very disappointing: one 100 kg. sack of millet, half a sack of sorghum and no groundnuts. She decided not to plant groundnuts this year because the seeds are so expensive and poor rains mean the crop may fail again. She chose to stick to her main food, millet, and to concentrate on the most favourable location to minimise the risk of complete failure while maximising the return from the one plot by careful tending and protection.

Her household's grain supply is precarious. By eating only two meals a day — a hazard to her children's healthy growth — Fatma and her family



*Hand weeding the dura crop.*

*Dura — a type of sorghum*

## Women

The death toll among women during the famine has been high. Accustomed to making sure that others — particularly guests — eat well, women usually eat last and will fare especially badly during times of food shortage.

In some regions, bride prices soared in 1985 as widowed men sought wives from depleted female populations.

Marriage in Sudan is traditionally as much a socio-economic as a romantic affair. The division of labour between the sexes is almost absolute and most rural people inhabit a highly segregated, but complementary society. Often, it is women who bear the brunt of the workload. On top of intense seasonal cultivation activities, women have year-round responsibility for carrying water, finding firewood, soaking and grinding grain, cooking, washing, and caring for children and the aged.

Opportunities for rural women to make money to buy food are limited. In many areas it is neither culturally acceptable nor practical for women to migrate long distances to towns in search of wage labour as men do, although they must travel to find seasonal agricultural work. Some women make and sell cooking pots, grass matting, leather goods and other handicrafts. Many traditional healers and all traditional midwives are women. They can expect small presents in cash or kind from their clients.

While men grow the cereals, for the most part women must grow the vegetable crops they need to keep themselves and their children alive. Drought and desertification are making rural subsistence increasingly difficult. Lack of fuel can be as much of an obstacle to eating as lack of food. When trees become scarce, and in the rainy season when wood is wet, women can spend the whole day getting enough firewood to cook one meal. Every day, women in rural Sudan confront — and inadvertently contribute to — a process of environmental decline.

For the great majority of Sudanese women, marriage and child-rearing represent the only route to status and security in the community. The religious and tribal welfare systems consolidated by marriage have constituted their only social safety net.

This net has been rent apart in recent years. The dispersal of people in search of food, productive land or paid work has left many families isolated. Civil war has disrupted life in the south of the country. Large numbers of women now find themselves 'head of the household', either through bereavement or displacement.

Even attempts at development have done little to benefit women. Projects designed to assist the poor farmer have focused on men. Extension workers, with their improved seeds and agricultural practices, are almost invariably male and have neither awareness of — nor access to — the lives of Sudanese women.

consume about five and a half kilogrammes of grain a week. The deficit in the last few years has been made up by buying from the market with milk money, and gifts from her husband. She also received some grain by threshing and winnowing a neighbour's millet crop.

Families with dispersed plots and short of family labour often hire people to work on the land, but Fatma cannot afford that. She single-handedly planted just under one hectare of millet, with a few melon and cow pea seeds mixed in. Normally she would save millet from the previous year's crop for planting, but this season it ran out so she bought seeds in the market, taking care that they were suitable for her land. Just in her immediate area, several types of both millet and sorghum seed are available, but each is best suited to particular soils and conditions, and their growth patterns vary.

Fatma's experience since childhood has convinced her that in areas under long-term cultivation, crop rotation is an important way to conserve soil fertility. The land she planted this year was fallow last year and used for groundnuts the year before that. With the owners of neighbouring plots she agrees which crops to plant on each one so the area can be managed as a whole and protected from roaming livestock. In her area, cattle return from their southern migration at the start of the cultivating season and are penned on millet plots for several nights to ensure that the land is well manured. Fatma is able to benefit from this because her farming neighbours own nomadic herds.

Planting began in July and she worked every day, finishing the plot a few days ago. Now it is time for hand-weeding and she works until dusk, resting for a few hours in the hottest part of the day. The day's work is a weeded area of about 20 metres by 25 metres. The weeds and cut grass are collected up to take back as fodder for her cows, then at 6.30 she goes home, picking up some firewood along the way.

Once home, Fatma washes, prays, and then secures the animals for the night and gives them the fodder. She milks the cow and the goat and makes supper — millet porridge with milk. There is time to be with her children before she puts them to bed, prays and goes to sleep at about 9 pm.

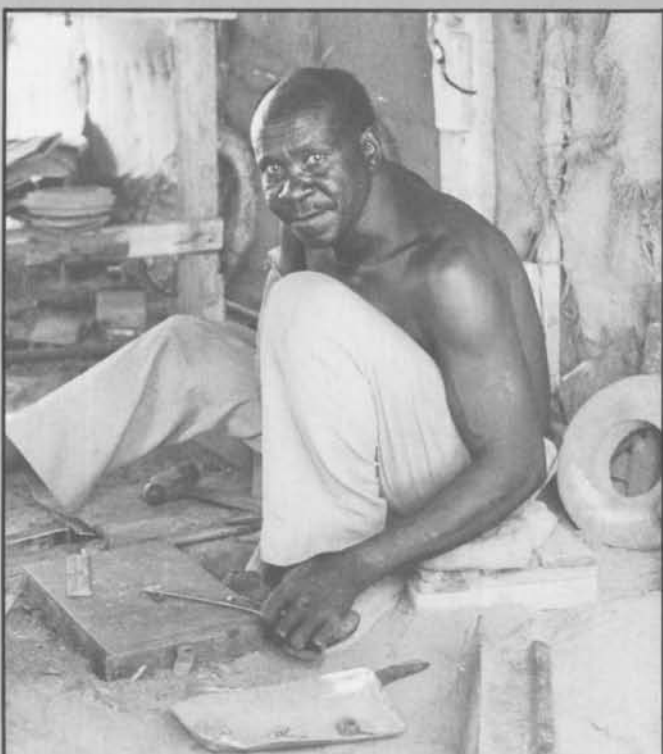
Fatma's life is being fundamentally affected by drought. Low millet yields increase her dependency on her husband and her reliance on the money from milk sales. But milk yields are also falling because of the disappearing forage and grazing around the village. Fatma has no spare money to buy fodder. Her small income from milk is taken up by buying food. There is nothing left to repair her house, or to buy clothes, cooking equipment or tools, all of which need replacing.

*In 1983, Fatma's normally hard life was getting worse every day. Although she owned animals and had a husband who occasionally helped her, without money or good land Fatma's choices — and chances — were limited. When the next harvest failed and the one after that, she probably sold the animals for food. With little grain, as food prices rose and her income fell, soon there would have been nothing left. Perhaps Fatma was lucky, and got more help from her family or husband. Perhaps Western food aid did reach her. If not, she and her children will have become just three more victims in a disaster which was not even graced with statistics.*



Nick Cater

*Traditional saddle-maker*



Wendy Wallace

*A tin-smith in Port Sudan turns scrap metal into bolts and cooking utensils, to make a living*

# Markets:

## Few rural bargains

### Local Trades

With millions spending all their available money on food, leaving almost nothing for other purchases, large numbers of rural workers in traditional trades — from saddle makers to tin-smiths — who are themselves often in a precarious position unless they have land, will have been made destitute by the drought or forced to join many others already looking for work in towns.

They suffer the same difficulties as farmers in trying to get credit, while often facing the competition of imported goods sold by merchants. Yet such trades-people could be the nucleus for the real growth and development of appropriate small industries in rural areas.

The enterprise possible when finance is available has been seen among some of the southerners employed by the Jongel Canal Company. One man in Malakal used his pay-off money when the digging stopped to buy guava trees. Later he was able to use his own crop and other fruit grown locally, and employ several staff, when he set up what was almost certainly the first 'juice bar' in Upper Nile province.

A policy to give more support to small rural businesses would require not only credit, but greater assistance in marketing, perhaps specific protectionist measures against some imports, and improvements in rural roads and transport services.

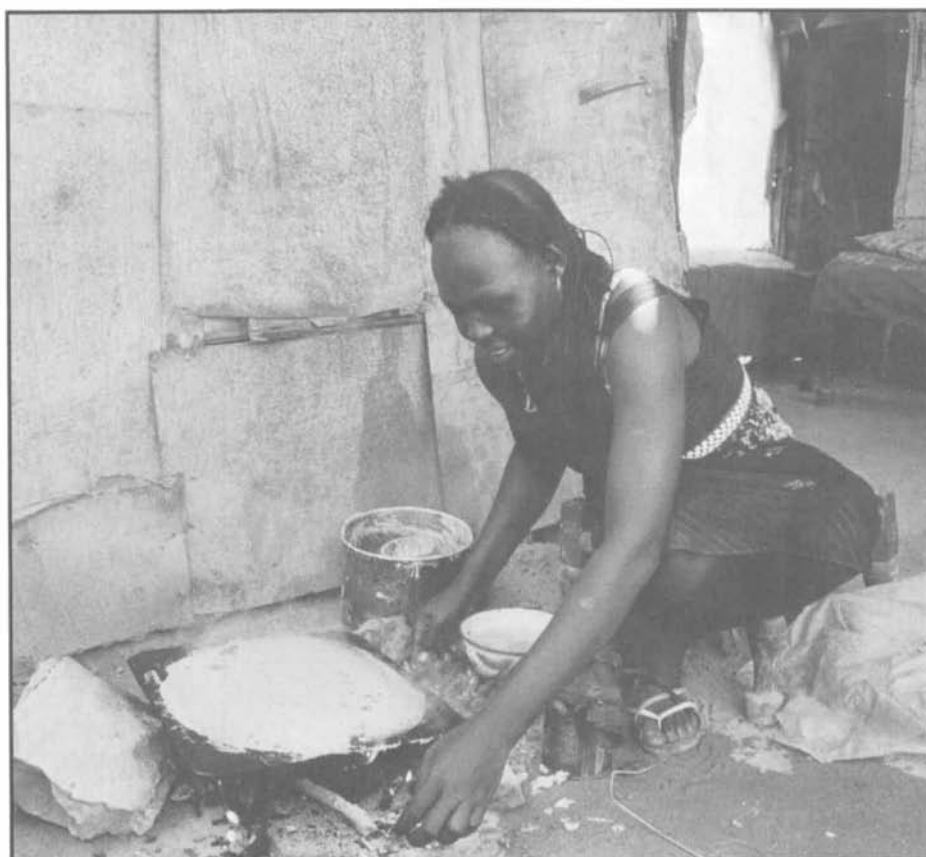
**P**EOPLE IN RURAL AREAS have very little choice about where or when to sell what they grow, and the odds of getting a good price are stacked against them.

Under *sheil*, one study suggested that 75% of cash crops and 40% of traditional subsistence foods, such as millet, were pledged before harvest to merchants at far below market prices.

With most Sudanese 'roads' merely rough tracks and traders' lorries the only transport, crops go to the nearest market. A report on South Kordofan by a Western aid agency did not find a single market that was not dominated by a cartel of seven to ten merchants fixing prices.

Even though the Government is intervening less to keep down prices, increases in export returns have often not been passed on to producers. 'Fair' prices would still have to take account of the large distances and difficulties involved in moving crops to the bigger towns for sale or to Port Sudan for export.

The grapevine is no doubt as efficient as it can be but the lack of accurate information allows great variations in prices in different areas. Of course, poor farmers with debts and without transport never get the best price — they must always sell soon after the harvest at the nearest market for whatever they can get.



Making bread to sell in Port Sudan

Wendy Wallace

**... but aren't some farmers doing well by getting tractors?**



*Mechanised Farming Corporation tractor, south Kordofan.*



# Mechanised Farming:

## Environmental hit-and-run

**M**ECHANISED RAIN-FED FARMING SCHEMES subsidised by foreign aid have helped to degrade the environment and made vast profits for a small group of entrepreneurs such as retired soldiers, businessmen and merchants. The schemes started during the Second World War but were strongly encouraged as part of the efforts to turn Sudan into a major grain exporter as the 'Breadbasket of the Middle East'. With money for loans and subsidies from the World Bank and other agencies, businessmen were encouraged to buy leases on large tracts of land, import tractors and plant crops, mainly sorghum, for export.

Various safeguards, such as lease conditions about retaining tree belts or creating corridors for the nomads' herds, were often ignored, while many of the mechanised farms simply started work without permission. By the late 1970s more than six million *feddans* (1 feddan = about an acre) were officially allotted to mechanised farming but another three million *feddans* were believed to have been unofficially cultivated.

The lease-holders — or usually their employees — move in and pay off or evict traditional farmers, exclude nomads' herds from grazing except on harvest stubble, clear off trees and cover, often by fire, and deep plough the soil. After a few years without fertiliser, crop yields fall below profitable levels and the exhausted and eroded land is abandoned, while the lease-holder moves on to do it again elsewhere, leaving behind landless labourers or migrant workers who were employed on the farm.

The results have been poverty for the displaced farmers, ruined land, profits for the elite, a good political return for the then Nimeiri Government and plenty of sorghum for export to the Middle East — but not much food for poor Sudanese. The schemes are still continuing.

*... but don't the irrigation schemes help feed people?*



Wendy Wallace

*Cotton In the Gezira waiting to be transported*

# Irrigation:

## High cost crops

### Positive Points...2

#### How Kebkabiya's Gardens Grow

Families in the Kebkabiya area of north Darfur usually obtain their basic food supply from rain-fed cultivation of millet on land with sandy soil, and supplement that with their animals' meat and milk, wild fruits and berries, and food bought from elsewhere with money from selling livestock, craft work or agricultural labour.

The severe drought of the last five years brought repeated crop failures, causing serious shortages of families' grain supplies that could not easily be made up by other activities. In 1985, the villages with the best land and water produced less than half their normal grain for food and seed needs, while the poorer villages managed less than 5 per cent. Grain prices soared.

The main new tactic used by farmers to fight this crisis has been to start small irrigated gardens on soils in or near the beds of the three *wadis* — seasonal rivers — that pass through the area. In the early years of the drought, people began using these alluvial soils for their usual rain-fed grain crops, because they are more fertile and better at retaining water, though harder to dig.

In the last few years, however, farmers have planted wheat and vegetables after the millet harvest to provide food and to sell for grain. Even poor villagers who do not usually have cultivating rights over lands in the *wadi* can borrow small plots for a season without paying.

Most farmers dig their own wells, which have to be between five and twelve feet deep to reach water. Goatskin buckets on a rope are usually used to lift the water — diesel pumps are far too expensive for ordinary villagers. The garden plots are normally less than half an acre, with most work done by women, and seeds are often given to neighbours until they can propagate their own.

The garden cultivators try to plant a combination of crops, such as onions, okra, tomatoes or peppers, which take longer to grow but can usually be dried for storage and bring a good return, some wheat to help the grain supply, and quicker vegetables — like radishes — for a continuous small income.

Such farmers are eager to learn about different methods, new seeds and pest problems, but contacts with more experienced people or agricultural officials are not always simple, and women cannot easily consult strangers. Most farmers rely on trial and error and neighbours' advice in facing up to their many problems, from plant diseases and pesticide hazards to efficient water-lifting methods and better crop varieties.

Kebkabiya's important initiative will be supported by an Oxfam project involving agricultural extension work in villages, investigation of water-lifting methods and help for small farmers to solve their problems, grow more food and improve their incomes.

**T**HE WORLD BANK found that large-scale irrigated agriculture in Sudan is the costliest system when compared with traditional or rain-fed mechanised agriculture and makes the least foreign exchange. But for Sudan, and the people who run it, irrigation is centralised, controllable, suffers few labour problems, is the system least affected by weather and produces income from cash crops — cotton, peanuts, sugar — directly for the Government.

Unlike very small-scale irrigated schemes, which have a large potential for helping poor farmers, big irrigation schemes have followed other ambitious projects by running over time and budget, producing less than planned and proving beyond the management capacity of the public sector.

Even the giant Gezira cotton growing scheme, which Britain started after the First World War to ensure itself cheap supplies, was not the unqualified success it is often painted. It was late in completion, had to be enlarged to break even, and cost far more than first planned.

The tripartite set-up of investors, tenant farmers and Government made money in good years, but was often too inflexible to cope when the world price of cotton fell. As cotton expanded in importance, bad years had a knock-on effect throughout the economy.

In 1957/58 the falling price left Sudan's cotton warehouses bursting, and paved the way for the World Bank to come in to finance an expansion of irrigation, while in the early 1970s the State mismanagement of the fluctuating cotton market helped start the downturn for Nimeiri's economy.

Greater private sector input has not guaranteed irrigated success. The Kenana sugar complex, whose investors included Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the multi-national company Lonrho, was conceived as a low-cost, high output solution to Sudan's sweet-tooth — which was expensive in imports — and as an export earner, when sugar prices climbed in the 1970s. By the time sugar production got underway, years late, the cost of the project had soared, while sugar had become exceedingly cheap.

Irrigation schemes certainly draw in farmers from traditional food-producing areas and integrate them further into the cash economy. They have been used to settle nomads, who have not always prospered, and the schemes disrupted grazing routes.

Pesticides and fertilizers, as well as tractors, pumps and fuel, cost huge sums in foreign exchange, while the sluggish canals spread malaria and bilharzia. Since the Niles are the only guaranteed water supply, big irrigation schemes are inevitably clustered around the rivers, increasing Sudan's already skewed concentration of development, jobs and money.

Tenants of the big schemes employ hundreds of thousands of migrant workers for the harvest. This disrupts village societies and agriculture, and makes the poorest even more vulnerable, by allowing migrants' links to the land to become more tenuous, while their families survive as best as they can back in their home village.

The final test of every scheme is whether the tenant farmers make money. If only because of the unwieldy Government systems for setting prices and allocating costs, it certainly varies widely, from scheme to scheme and year to year. While some tenant farmers are rich, almost everyone has to grow food and keep animals to make ends meet. Several researchers doubt whether large-scale irrigation schemes in Sudan are a development, since they find that many tenants in the Gezira are still so poor that they rely on *sheil* credit to pay their way.

*... but why don't people get their local councils to do something?*



*A village health worker sterilises basic equipment*

