

THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE

To journey across the Sahelian provinces — Yatenga, Soum, Oudalan and Seno — is to enter a world that is almost mesmeric in its timelessness, its seeming emptiness; a world also to be wondered at for the grandeur of its long, slow dying. A barren landscape of thin yellow grass and gravel, interspersed with the spreading patches of dead skin which is desertification. The skeletons of trees stand like contorted crosses in a graveyard where the battle for survival has been fought and lost. Carcasses of giant baobab trees, like fallen warriors, lie toppled on the scorched earth. The desolation is almost breathable.

On the dirt road, now and then, a solitary person appears, far from anywhere, walking, cycling, perhaps pushing a dead motorbike, carrying a waterpot. They seem lost figures walking into eternity: for miles further on, having overtaken them, one finds no destination to which they could conceivably have been heading.

In 20 years of drought and deforestation, many villages of the Sahel have lost a third, sometimes as much as half, of their cultivable land. And 'lost' is not just a euphemism: in the dry season, from November to May, hot, abrasive easterly winds lift millions of tons of precious topsoil from the now denuded terrain, carrying it westwards to fall uselessly in the Atlantic Ocean. And from June to October, when the rain does come, it often comes in torrents, and where little plant life remains to protect it, the soil is washed away into gulleys and rivers.

Not only in the Sahel but throughout the more populous, semi-arid regions of the country, the land is under threat. The centuries-old equilibrium between man and nature has broken down under a combination of stresses. Apart from rising populations and a slow but progressive drying of the climate, one of the main factors is the disintegration of the survival strategies of rural societies, caused in turn by factors as diverse as the country's foreign debt and the introduction of cash crops.

The threat of drought and famine has been a condition of life in the Sahel since the earliest times. We know of terrible famines lasting several years in each of the last three centuries. But the drought which began in 1968, and which continued with only brief periods of remission for almost 20 years, has seen the precarious balance between people and nature wrecked almost beyond repair. It is not that tens of thousands of people died of hunger and thirst; it is not that their herds were decimated; for in earlier times this could have been regarded as the harsh price for maintaining an equilibrium between human activities and what the fragile earth could sustain. The crisis now is at once brutally simple and infinitely complex. It poses essentially one question: with the land overworked and dying, with more people than ever competing to scratch a living from it and in desperation ignoring their own time-honoured codes for conserving their natural resources, and with few hopes of climatic change in their favour, what possible transformation can offer a future for these people and their earth?

In the past, the Gourounsi people in the south of Burkina were particularly careful in managing their environment. Their elders included a Chief of the Greenwood, whose job was to protect the forests and to ensure that valuable species were not felled. But today, that concern is being overtaken by other demands on land use. And when people from some other place are liable to come in their trucks to chop down your trees, there may be no other viable strategy for poor villagers than to get in first.

Elsewhere, the fatal process of deforestation continues unabated. Bushfires, it is estimated, blacken as much as 50,000 square kilometres — one-fifth of the country's land area — every year. Most are set deliberately to clear land for agricultural expansion or to encourage new grazing;

'Years ago the land around our village was forest.

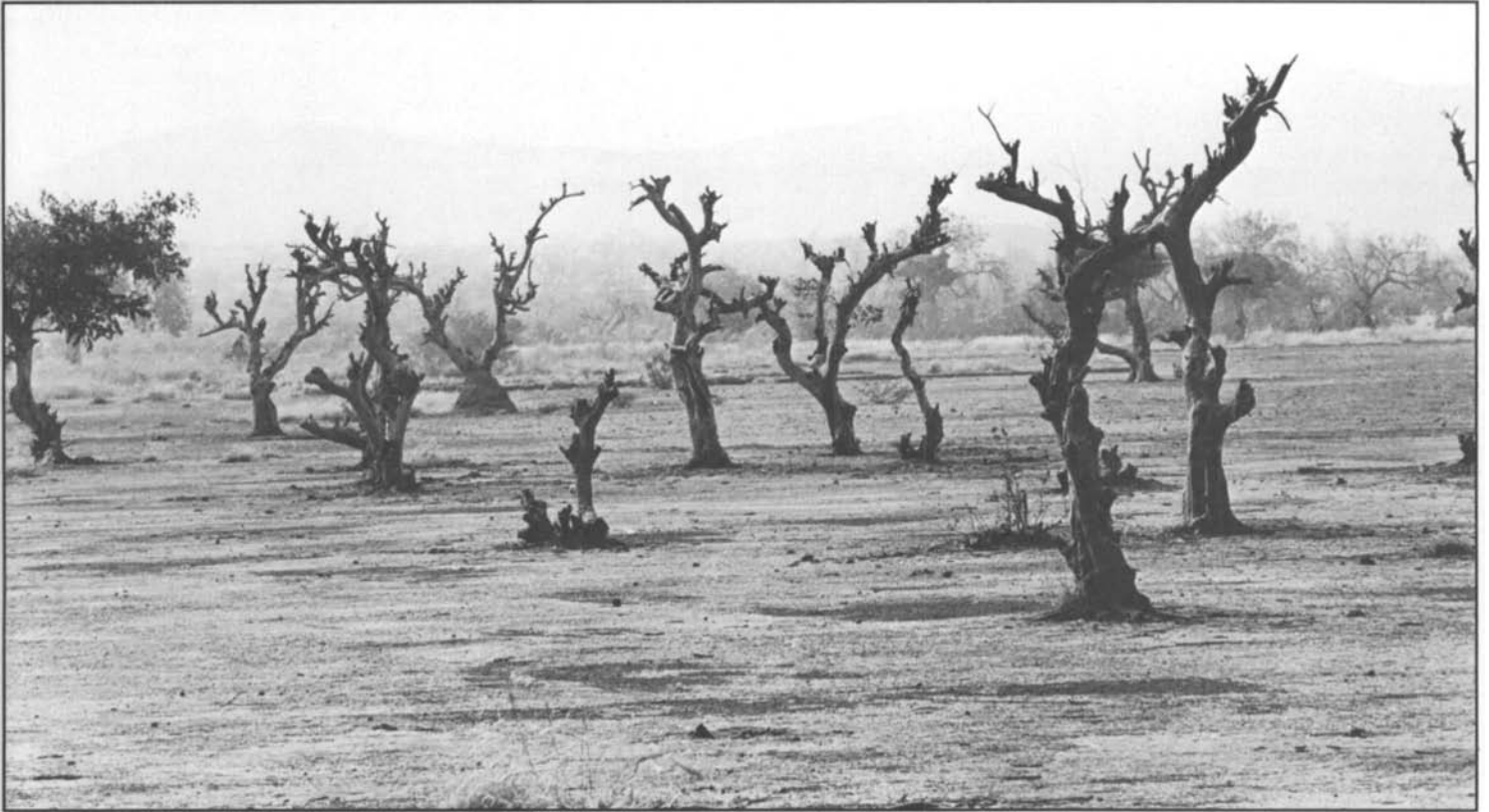
There were many wild animals — lions, panthers, buffalo, elephant, antelope and a lot more. But now there is almost no wildlife, and very few trees.' —

Guiro Mahama, president of Goumba village group, Yatenga



The lions and elephants have gone, but poisonous snakes remain. Guiro Mahama, of Goumba village, Yatenga province, examines a specimen.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)



The desert creeps across Yatenga province, northern Burkina.

(Mark Edwards/Oxfam)

sometimes also because it is the traditional belief that fire can purge evil spirits at the New Year. Combined with the country's fuelwood consumption of 5 million cubic metres a year, these factors provide some measure of the deforestation problem.

While other countries of the Sahel are no less threatened by this kind of environmental bankruptcy, Burkina is widely regarded as the most progressive in its efforts to tackle the crisis. Key to the government's policy has been a three-pronged campaign against bushfires, against illegal woodcutting, and against the uncontrolled grazing of livestock. Enforcement of this policy under Sankara was tough, but by 1989 the sanctions against offenders had been relaxed. Repressive measures, explained the then Environment Minister Beatrice Damiba, were no substitute for awareness-raising: 'The struggle against desertification is a long-term one. The first necessity is to convince the people of the rightness of what one wants them to do.'

Traditional rights of property, sustainable for as long as the people-to-land ratio remained low, have been deemed an obstacle to rational land use which also contributes to the deterioration of soils. There are three types of land-holding under the traditional system: a family's collective hereditary right to land, which any member of that family may exploit; a priority right of the village chief to certain lands held by him as a symbol of the compact between his people and the supernatural powers of the earth; and usage rights, permanent or temporary, which may be assigned to a group or individual.

Over the past century, as emigration drained increasing numbers of workers from the family fields, the practice of land-lending became widespread. But because tree-planting had traditionally been a mark of land ownership, it was a condition of such loans that the tenant should not plant trees or make other improvements. So the land suffered. Altogether, the system has become less and less able to cope with change and competing land-use pressures. Under the colonial administration, things were further complicated by laws introducing the alien concept of private property, designed not least to enable the colonists to obtain an outright title to land.

At independence, therefore, Burkina inherited a dual system, which is still in place. The government has been preparing a fundamental land reform designed to permit nationwide land-use planning as a basis for promoting food self-sufficiency and housing development. Proposed legislation will make all land ultimately the property of the government. In the area of each village, zones will be demarcated for housing, agriculture, livestock, and forest land. But many peasants are hostile to these plans, some fearing that the zoning regulations will dispossess them, others that government ownership will leave their villages no sacred ground for the *chefs de terre* (land chiefs) to observe their traditional rites — on which depend, according to custom, their prospects of a good harvest.

Meanwhile, land reform or no, many thousands of villagers are now taking the future into their own hands and finding they can hold out hopes to their children which they thought were lost for ever. By the year 2000, it might just be possible to look back and see these faint sparks of energy and hope as the start of a renaissance for the Sahel.

'Now we are dynamic and determined to go ahead,' says Guiro Mahama, the village group president in Goumba, a thatched-hut settlement in the dry scrub of Yatenga province. 'You can't help a man who is asleep, but we are awake, and determined to progress.'

Is there any evidence to justify such hopes against what look like overwhelming odds? So far it remains scattered in the villages like Goumba where a few people have decided, mostly on their own initiative, to join together in practical measures to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. But the evidence from these communities, including some of the poorest in the land, shows that it's working — and generally with no more than a little stimulus of outside help from overseas voluntary agencies who, unlike the big, multi-million dollar aid donors, are the only ones able to think small, the only ones who start by designing projects in consultation with the people themselves.

That is the testimony from an increasing number of community-based initiatives undertaken by Burkina's own development groups such as the Naam, and by overseas agencies like Oxfam: helping to build small-scale dams to give local communities an assured water supply; helping pastoralists to rebuild herds depleted by the drought; providing start-up funds to women's groups so they can launch income-earning schemes and feed their families better. Perhaps most dramatically of all, with the simplest kind of grassroots technology, they have enabled villages all over Burkina to transform a traditional but not very efficient method of water conservation into one that is bringing their land back to life.

It all started around 1979 with a small Oxfam experiment in Yatenga, building low U-shaped earth walls to catch rainwater for tree seedlings planted inside them. The peasants who tried them were impressed, but were more interested in using the technique to grow food crops. Within a couple of years, developing a traditional method of their own, they were constructing low barriers of stones, stalks and branches across their fields to halt the water run-off.

At that stage, the main drawback was that on their usually very flat lands it was impossible to discern the contour lines on which the stone lines needed to be built in order to be fully effective. Here again, the Oxfam team came up with a brilliantly simple answer: a transparent, water-filled tube attached at each end to a vertically-held pole. With the poles placed a certain distance apart, they will be on the same contour when the water is at the same level in each end of the tube. Illiterate peasants can be taught how to use these water-levels in a two-day course.

From that point on, Oxfam's *Projet Agro-Forestier* — PAF for short — took off by leaps and bounds. Of more than 100 Oxfam projects in Burkina, it has become the best known and the most closely studied. In 1981, the stone lines or *diguettes* had been built on only seven hectares; by

Oxfam's spirit-level in action: two graduated poles and a transparent plastic tube filled with water enable farmers to find the contour lines on an apparently flat field.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

Constructing a 'diguette': a line of stones laid along a contour line will catch rain water and reduce soil erosion.

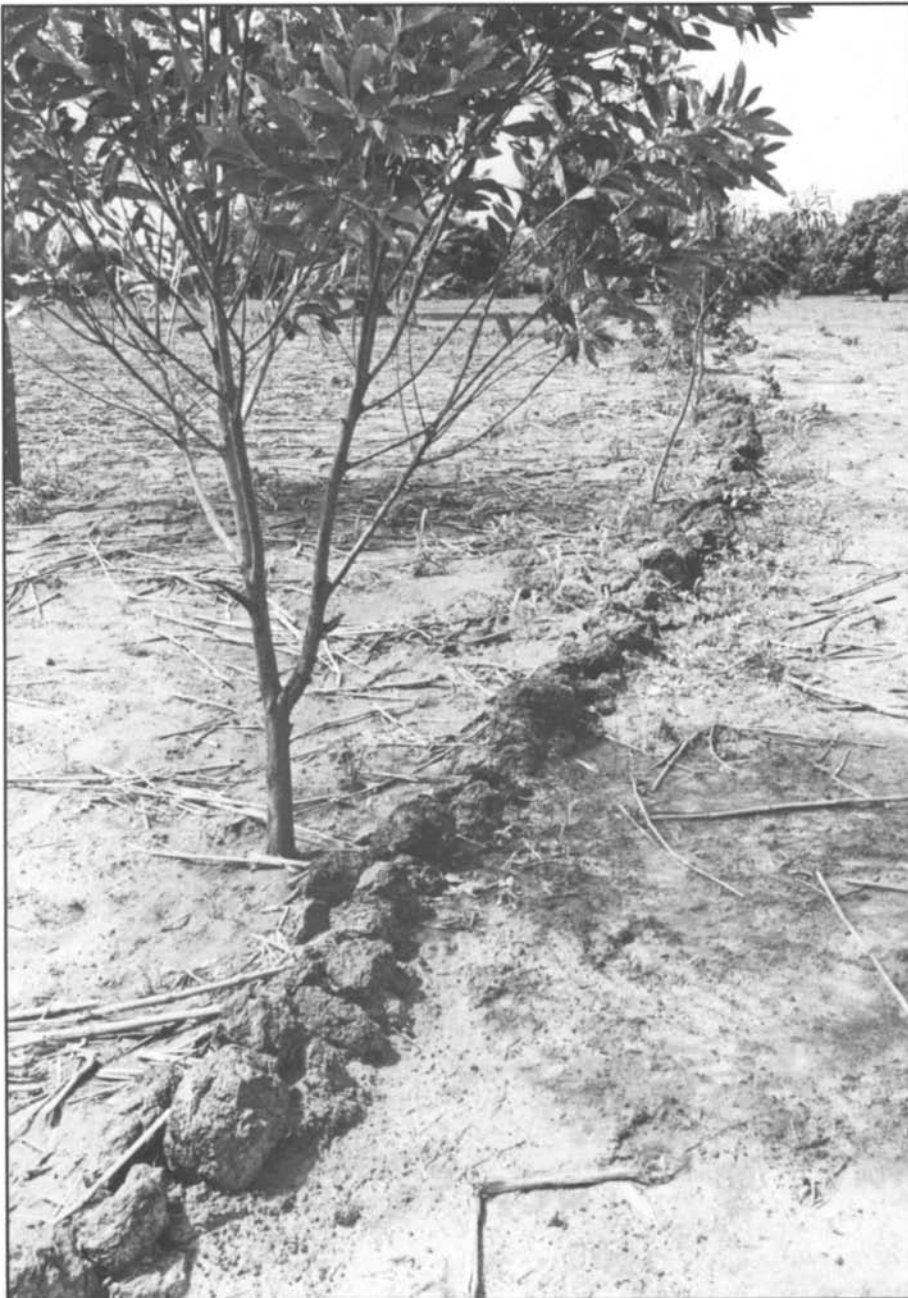
(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)



1987, farmers had installed them on 1,200 hectares, the project was buying plastic tubing by the kilometre for water-levels, and a continuous stream of visitors was coming to learn how it was done. Nationwide, with adoption of this technique by the government and other aid agencies, the area of land treated now exceeds 5,000 hectares.

By increasing water penetration of the hard ground, the diguettes quickly proved they could reduce erosion, improve crop yields by up to 40 or 50 per cent, and recover totally degraded land. In one test undertaken by farmers themselves, it was found that where there were no stone lines, the soil level dropped four inches in a single year; but where they had been built, the soil level rose six to eight inches.

In the village of Baszaido, three years after the first diguettes were built, the contrast between land so treated and the rest is remarkable. Within the stone lines there is tall grass everywhere and a good harvest of ripening sorghum. On the other side of the path, a large expanse of barren ground. In another village, Ranawa, trees which were dying are recovering as the soil retains more moisture, and because the water table is replenished with rain penetrating the ground, wells which had dried up are giving water again.



**Noogo village, Yatenga province:
eucalyptus trees planted behind a
diguette.**

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

The PAF technique is extremely cheap, which accounts for the fact that it has now spread from Yatenga to more than half the provinces of the country, adopted widely by the government's extension service and by other voluntary organisations. Thousands have now been trained and news of the amazing results achieved with the diguettes continues to spread by example from village to village.

In recent times, under the direction of Yatenga-born Mathieu Ouédraogo, PAF has evolved a more integrated package of measures, which includes sowing live hedges and tree seedlings, digging compost pits, and constructing enclosures for goats. Considered a more sustainable approach than the stone lines on their own, this package, project workers hope, will be adopted as widely as the original scheme.

It would be wishful to imagine that small-scale innovations such as this could herald a renaissance for the battered Sahel. For every spark of hope there remain a dozen potential disasters that could snuff it out. In Goumba village, it is that spark, none the less, that keeps Guiro Mahama going and gives him a new confidence for tomorrow.

Watering neem and eucalyptus seedlings in a tree nursery run by the Ministry of Environment in Ouahigouya, Yatenga province. Oxfam's PAF team distributes the plants to distant villages.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)



RECORD CROPS – NOT ENOUGH TO EAT

Production of the main staple crops, millet and sorghum, beat all records in 1988, and in good years the country is now reckoned to be fully self-sufficient in cereals. Food production overall grew by more than 7 per cent a year in the period 1983-87, well over double the rate of population growth and in striking contrast with the negative food trends in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.

That represents a big improvement in the past ten years, even though it hides wide disparities in the amount that people in different income groups and different parts of the country can actually obtain.

Food aid makes up for some of the inequalities of distribution, but Burkina is still short of fruit, vegetables, meat and fish. Malnutrition is widespread, and the United Nations estimates that the country's overall food consumption is 14 per cent less than the minimum required for good health. Children are malnourished, in particular, because their families cannot afford an adequate diet, but also because of traditional eating habits and the lack of nutrition education for mothers. Food aid, though a necessary stop-gap to prevent famine in times of acute drought, is not a solution. Often it arrives too late, and, equally seriously, it depresses local farm prices, so that farmers in some areas give up growing the staple cereals and shift instead to cotton or other non-essential crops which are more remunerative. The net effect is likely to reduce food security. In 1988, the government wanted to buy up the cereal surplus of 42,000 tons from farmers, with the intention of storing and re-selling it at a modest mark-up in the hungry season before the next harvest. But it would have required a budget of £4 million and a massive logistical operation. In the end, the private merchants got there first, offering a higher purchase price. But as always, their re-sale mark-up, when people's own supplies ran out, would be several times the government margin, leaving the poor without the means to buy enough for their needs.

Progress towards food self-sufficiency was a principal objective of the Five-Year Plan for 1986-90. The strategy was based on targets for increasing production, raising peasant incomes, cutting the trade deficit attributable to food imports, and reducing the risk of crop failures through improved management of water supplies. Among other things, the Plan aimed to promote more intensive production techniques — the traditional hoe being still the only agricultural tool in general use — and more training and extension support for the mass of peasant farmers. Its authors can point to some successes. Cereal production, as noted above, has risen encouragingly. Though only one-third of the rural population has access to clean water, a big effort to improve water supplies has seen scores of small dams being built, providing some irrigation and water for animals. Also, in the first two years of the Plan, some 4,000 new wells and boreholes were dug, cutting substantially the distance that many women had to walk to fetch water.



Selling millet from a village grain bank (funded by Oxfam) in Passoré province.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

Longa village, Yatenga province: preparing the ground for planting millet and beans.

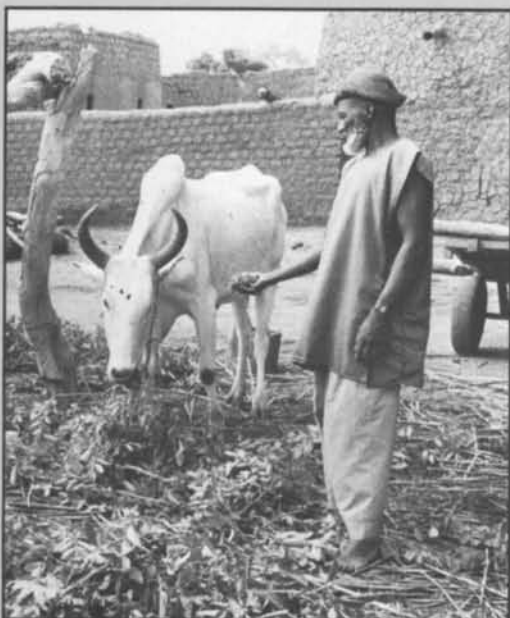
(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

CHANGING PATTERNS ON THE LAND

'My father had a huge herd of animals. We were particularly rich in cows and employed several herders to guard them. I knew nothing but the taste of milk and meat. Today I have forgotten the taste of that life. Now all those animals are dead and I am forced to live solely from farming.'

'Over the last few years I have watched the landscape change in the most dramatic fashion. It has all passed before my eyes as if I were watching a film with a bad ending. We have not been able to reconstitute the herds which were almost wiped out by the drought. Animals are just about finished here.' —

*Hamadou Namoudou,
Saouga village, Ouadalan
province*



(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

While Burkina's farmers have for generations been able to trust their simple, time-tested methods of cultivation, the winds of change are now blowing unrelentingly across their land. And for many nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists it has been that much harder, bringing to an end an age-old way of life which was the only way of making sustainable use of land on the arid Saharan fringe. Sustainable it was, but no more — at least only for a rapidly diminishing number. Too little rain, too many people and animals, whose overall numbers in the Sahel increased in spite of the ravages of drought: all in all, too many stresses for the land to bear. And on top of this, pastoralists have found themselves having to compete in their traditional markets of Ghana and Ivory Coast with subsidised frozen beef imported from Argentina. Increasingly, herders find they have no option but to renounce the nomadic life and pick up a hoe for the first time in their family's history.

In the northern provinces also, a traditional pattern of inter-dependence between nomadic herders and settled farmers is breaking down. The nomads would receive straw for their animals, in return for bringing their herds to fertilise the farmers' fields. But the farmers are being encouraged to go in for mixed farming themselves, with livestock to provide manure for their land, so they now want the straw for their own animals. Conflicts have also arisen as the farmers have bit by bit taken over areas previously used for grazing. The herders find themselves increasingly hemmed in, and although they still account for 30 per cent of the country's official export earnings, their share of national income is down from one-fifth in the 1970s to one-eighth now.

In the south west, meanwhile, a massive campaign by international agencies over several years has effectively eradicated river blindness, a disease which had kept population levels low and discouraged inward migration from other parts of the country. As a result, another wave of migration from the north has been opening up these new, fertile lands. But when food harvests are good, these farmers have found, there is no way to get their surpluses to market, even when other parts of the country, their crops blighted by locusts or inadequate rains, may be in desperate need. So many farmers have switched to growing cotton, which — because it earns valuable foreign exchange — the government will collect and buy at a guaranteed price. The south west is now Burkina's main cotton-producing region, and the impact of this development of the new lands is evidenced by the doubling of the country's cotton output between 1985 and 1988: from 85,000 tons to 176,000 tons in just three years.

Those figures look encouraging, and they are exactly the kind highlighted by the World Bank or the IMF when they seek to convince African governments that their economic salvation depends on strategies to promote exports. Unfortunately, there is another side to the story. The terms of trade for Africa's primary commodity exports, despite some fluctuation, have generally declined over the past 30 years. The rich world consumes more and more of Africa's produce, and pays steadily less in real terms for it. In the case of cotton, 10,000 tons sold at the world market price in January 1984 would have earned Burkina about US\$19 million. Five years later, to earn the same amount the country had to sell 13,750 tons — and that makes no allowance for inflation. So just to keep income static, the cotton crop has to take up more precious land each year. For most of Africa, the diminishing returns of export-based economic strategies can only be averted by a drastic mortgaging of their natural resources. And if that is the best the rich world can recommend, its citizens must be prepared to understand — and either accept or fight — the consequences of human misery that it entails.

THE FARMERS' FUTURE

Almost 90 per cent of Burkina's people live off the land, so the future of farming is critical for the country's development. The government recognises this, even if it doesn't invest a great deal of money in agriculture; and the World Bank sees agriculture-related activities as the mainstay of the economy for the foreseeable future. So what are the prospects?

Many possibilities of change and modernisation could be cited, but most are highly uncertain. Three trends are worth mentioning, of which two could, in theory, radically improve Burkina's primary sector economy. The first trend is a changing attitude to farm investment in the more prosperous areas. In one of the richer cotton and cereal-growing areas, one-quarter of all farms now have animal-drawn ploughs, and their output in the past five years has increased dramatically. The power of example, spreading from village to village, could in time work the transformation which many expensive aid projects, intended to introduce farm mechanisation, have failed to achieve. Against this, however, is the fact that increases in output have largely been achieved by expanding the areas under cultivation, rather than by improved yields per hectare. And studies elsewhere in Burkina have shown that farmers with animal-drawn ploughs get only minimal increases in production, sometimes not enough to repay the cost of the plough.

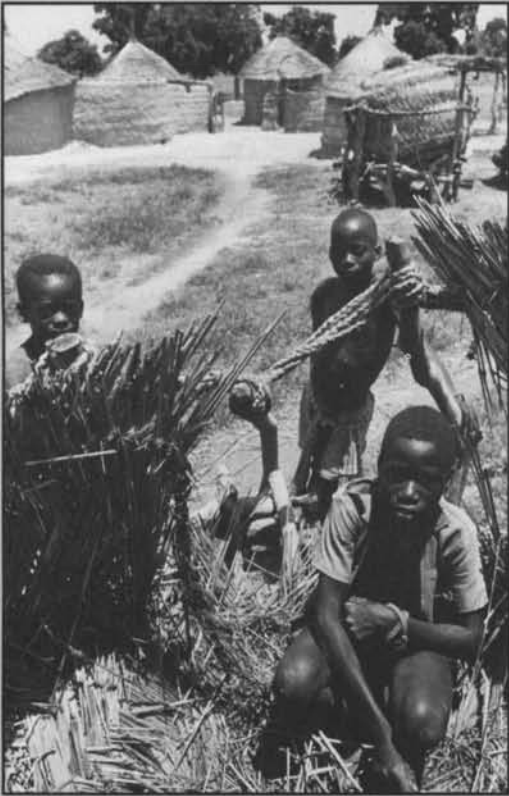
A second hopeful area is the improvement of traditional crop varieties to increase yields and to make them more resistant to drought and pests. A number of improved sorghum varieties have been developed and adopted by farmers, but so far researchers have been unable to produce any millets capable of performing better than local varieties under the harsh conditions of the Sahel. In the longer term, it is an open question whether biotechnology may come up with altogether new kinds of crops suitable for the world's dry and semi-arid regions. So far, it seems that biotech salvation is only for those who can pay a high price for their indulgences — and who can hold out the promise of rich markets to make it worthwhile for the agribusiness multinationals to invest in the research. Burkina, and the Sahel in general, are unlikely to be able to buy such favours.

Perhaps the best bet, though by no means radical, is the third scenario: a continuing multiplication across the country of small village self-help schemes to restore the land, to make the best of the erratic rains, to plant crops again where for years nothing would grow, to put trees back on the denuded landscape: in short, to create the conditions where people can start to think about tomorrow. It may sound facile to a westerner's ear, but thinking about tomorrow is a luxury unknown to most people of the Sahel until the present generation. Once realised and — PAF! — all manner of unthinkable things emerge into the realm of the possible. In the three Sahelian provinces of Oudalan, Seno and Soum, for example, a significant number of associations of village groups has emerged. There are now over 400 village groups in these provinces, and they are said to represent as much as 80 per cent of the people.



Ploughing in Ranawa village, Yatenga province.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)



An empty granary in Dawanagomde village, near Ouagadougou.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

THERE ARE NO SIGNPOSTS...

... to the village of Dawanagomde. A collection of huts buried in the bush a day's walk from the capital, Dawanagomde looks depressed — an impression confirmed in conversation with Mr Jeanny Tapsoba, president of the village group.

The settlement is said to be about 200 years old, but it's apparent that not much has happened in that time to improve the lives of its inhabitants. At present, Mr Tapsoba told us, things are going from bad to worse. First, they have a big problem with water: there is only one well, which is just not enough for their needs, and each year it dries up months before the rains come. The soil has become very poor, and crop yields are therefore declining. Food from this year's harvest wouldn't last long and the villagers expected to face six months of real hardship after that. Some of them knew a bit about vegetable gardening, but without water there was no chance of trying that.

There was a lot of illness in the village, he added, but at least there was a health post now where they could buy some medicines. In the past they had built diguettes of earth to retain water in the rainy season, but without any technical assistance they didn't work well. One ray of hope was a project to help them construct better stone diguettes, being organised by a local voluntary agency, FONADES. That, they hoped, would put life back into their badly eroded land and enable them to grow more food and escape the annual nightmare of the hungry season.

There wasn't much else to look forward to, except, for the children perhaps, Mr Tapsoba's nightly literacy classes. He gives them free, and the children sit on the ground or on a classroom bench under a thatch-roofed shelter, while Mr Tapsoba writes on a big blackboard. His handwriting is very neat. For Dawanagomde, his lessons and the new diguettes are perhaps their only claim on the future.

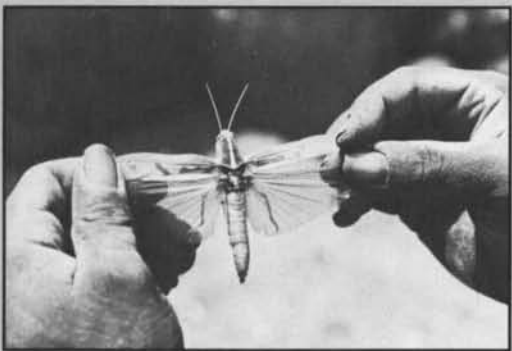
FAMINE EARLY WARNING

Every month in the three Sahelian provinces most vulnerable to food emergencies, a team of researchers monitors the conditions in eight selected villages. This is the *Système d'Alerte Précoce (SAP)*, a famine early-warning system which since 1987 has been giving the government regular reports on food supply prospects.

The researchers monitor rainfall, food stocks, crop development during the growing season, animal health, the condition of pasture and water-points for livestock, market prices, and the movement of people. Apart from written reports, radio can be used to give Ouagadougou urgent warning of events such as locust attacks.

In October 1989, at harvest time, the news from SAP was bleak. In some departments, they estimated, the harvests would be disastrous, giving only 20-30 per cent of normal yields. The damage had been done by a demoralising string of adversities unique to the Sahel: a plague of grasshoppers, birds, erratic and insufficient rains, a parasitic weed called *striga*, and an insect that kills millet by burrowing into the stalks.

Combining the stocks they had in hand with the new season's miserable crop, SAP Co-ordinator Julien Compaoré told us, many people would have enough food for barely six months. The next harvest was twelve months away. And the only reason they had any stocks at that point was that last year's food aid arrived six months too late. The Early Warning System could do nothing about that, he pointed out, and a lot of people went hungry as a result. Would the aid now urgently needed arrive on time this year?



Locusts are a problem all over the Sahel. In Goumba village, Yatenga province, farmers had to sow millet four times in one year, and each time the crop was destroyed.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

SARATA WISHES SHE COULD BAKE SOME CAKES

Heavily pregnant with her sixth child, Mrs Sarata Sawadogo was working in the fields, helping to harvest the millet crop. She didn't mind taking a break to sit down and talk.

Sarata is 34 years old. She was born in the nearby village of Boulouga and came here to Longa when she was married. She has five children — four boys and a girl — and the oldest is now 11. Things had changed a lot, she said, since she came here. Then, there weren't so many people and there was more to eat. The biggest hardship now was the shortage of food, and 'if one is hungry, one is always ill'.

Longa has a population of 670. Sarata lives with 40 others in her husband's family compound. She has three fields and grows millet, beans and sorghum. The land used to be rich, but is now exhausted. She gets only a meagre crop.

The average Burkinabè woman works 16-18 hours a day, and Sarata is no exception. Like most, her day begins with a strenuous session of pounding millet for the family's meal, then she fetches water and after that there's an expedition of maybe eight kilometres to collect firewood, before returning home to prepare the midday meal. In the afternoon she goes to work in the fields with her husband, after which another session of pounding millet and another trip to the well for water. In the evening there are domestic chores such as cleaning and mending the children's clothes.

If she had one wish for herself, Sarata said, she would like to be able to afford the ingredients to make cakes and biscuits, which she could sell in the village. That way she'd be able to earn a little money to buy things she needed for her family — but for the moment that was out of reach. For the village as a whole, the best thing of all would be a small grinding mill. That would save all the women the arduous daily job of pounding grain into flour for their meals.

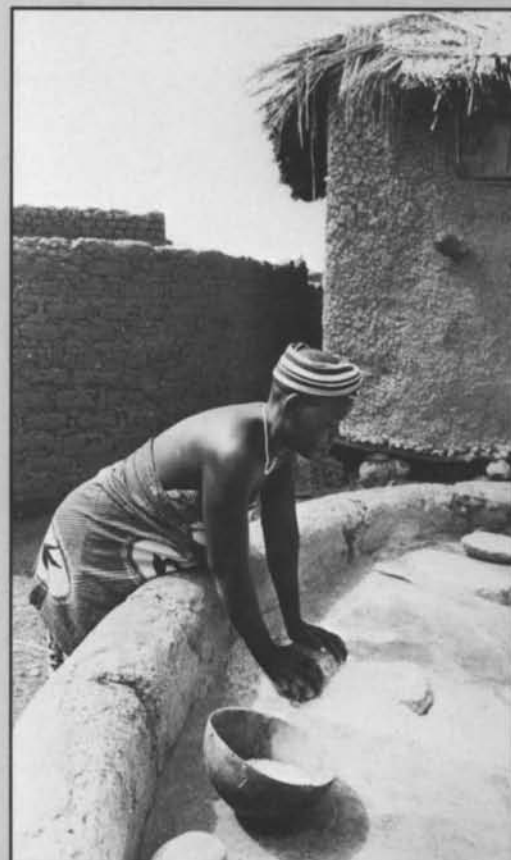
TÔ WITH EVERYTHING

A stiff white porridge made of millet flour, *tô* is the centrepiece of the Burkinabè diet. It is served with a variety of sauces made from meat, fish, sesame seeds, okra or baobab leaves. For those who can afford it, meals may also include yams, cassava or sweet potatoes, boiled or fried, while protein is provided by peanuts and cowpeas. The seeds of the shea nut yield oil and margarine. Apart from those living on urban salaries, meat and fish are mostly reserved for special occasions.

Zoumkoom is a common drink, made from ground millet, water and the juice of the tamarind fruit. For something stronger there is the universal *dôlo*, a home-brewed millet beer, or bottled beer from one of Burkina's two breweries. Only women brew *dôlo* and many women in Ouaga, if they are using traditional stoves, need more than one ton of firewood a week to keep their pots bubbling.

In polygamous households, it is the husband who draws up the roster of food preparation for his wives. The rule is that the woman who prepares the food also spends the night with him.

Hot meals are usually prepared two or three times a day, but increases in the price of firewood force many poor families in urban areas to reduce this to once a day. In a household of six people, firewood may cost up to £9 a month, nearly one-third of their average income.



Goumba village, Yatenga province:
Mrs Sarata Sawadogo grinding millet
into flour to make *tô* for the evening
meal.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

THE ROAD TO PROSPERITY?

For any country to make economic progress, it must find ways to produce a steady supply of tradeable goods or services. Some Third World countries have achieved rapid industrialisation in the past 25 years, but for the people of the Sahel this road to prosperity has proved to be another pot-holed track across the desert. Manufacturing industries accounted for 14 per cent of Burkina's national income in 1973, and 15 years later had still made no advance.

Centred largely on the processing of agricultural raw materials, the manufacturing sector is dominated by five parastatal enterprises handling cotton, sugar, edible oils, textiles, and flour. But the industrial sector as a whole, which counts about 200 companies, provides jobs for only about two per cent of Burkina's workforce. There has been hardly any foreign industrial development in the past 20 years.

The disincentives are all too evident. No industry can succeed without customers, and no more than a handful of Burkinabès have the cash to buy any goods which industry might produce. And, given the existing costs of labour, production and transport, there is little prospect of the manufacturing sector becoming competitive in export markets.

Two bright spots, at least in terms of giving a boost to Burkina's export figures since the mid-1980s, are cotton and gold. Gold sales quadrupled in the period from 1982 to 1987. But one of the most significant elements in sustaining the country's economy is the so-called 'informal sector' — that realm of small businesspeople, traders, artisans and pedlars who survive and thrive outside the formal economy by avoiding government regulations and taxes.

Noting that the informal sector produces more than 40 per cent of value-added in manufacturing, not to mention its significant role in agriculture and services, the World Bank has recommended that steps be taken to support and expand it. While it admits that 'informal-sector activities are commonly (and not without reason) equated with smuggling', the Bank says they play 'an essential role in development of the country's industrial fabric, employment creation and economic development in general'. In fact, informal sector trade between Sahelian countries — circumventing tariffs, paperwork and other controls — is estimated to exceed official trade by a substantial margin: often two or three times as much in volume and sometimes (notably in the case of gold smuggling) ten times.

Looking at the prospects for long-term industrialisation, the World Bank suggests that Burkina could aim to be competitive internationally either by thoroughly developing one or two product lines — processing and packaging fruit, meat or vegetables, for example — or by focusing its efforts on particular services, either health, tourism, data processing, telecommunications, banking, or training.

Although efforts are being made to extend tourist facilities, Burkina seems unlikely to improve rapidly on its current level of about 5,000 visitors a year. But given the poor state of services such as banking and communications in several neighbouring countries, the World Bank's suggestions are not as far-fetched as they might appear at first glance.

The remote north east region is thought to hold large deposits of manganese (as much as 17 million tons), but Northern financiers will not invest money in its extraction, doubting that it would be economically viable at current and projected world prices.



Lobi pottery on sale in Gaoua, near Bobo-Dioulasso.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

DÔLO: THE REAL THING

Antoinette Bancé lives in the Goughin district of Ouagadougou and has made a name with her production of dôlo, Burkina's home-brewed millet beer. Now in her fifties, she has developed the business in the footsteps of her mother and her grandmother before her.

'Apart from eating, sleeping and looking after the health of my family,' says Antoinette, 'the rest of my time is devoted to the dôlo. That means buying the millet, germinating and drying it, grinding it and preparing the beer, then selling it, washing and rinsing the pots and calabashes. All this doesn't get done in a day! It needs careful planning.'

Known as 'AB' to her friends, she has a regular clientele and four women to help her. As well as the customers who come to drink on the premises, Antoinette supplies her dôlo wholesale to a number of other women, who sell it in town. She buys wood by the truckload and brews twice a week on an improved stove with four huge pots.

'The customer is king, so it's my job to make sure I provide a dôlo that is pure and of good quality. There are no additives in my beer. The only thing I do is to make sacrifices each year with a chicken, to thank the ancestors and to ask them to protect and bless me.'

Her daughters, however, have no intention of following Antoinette in the dôlo business. 'That's the problem with town girls,' she shrugs. 'They think it's too much like hard work.'

A COFFEE-STALL IN DORI

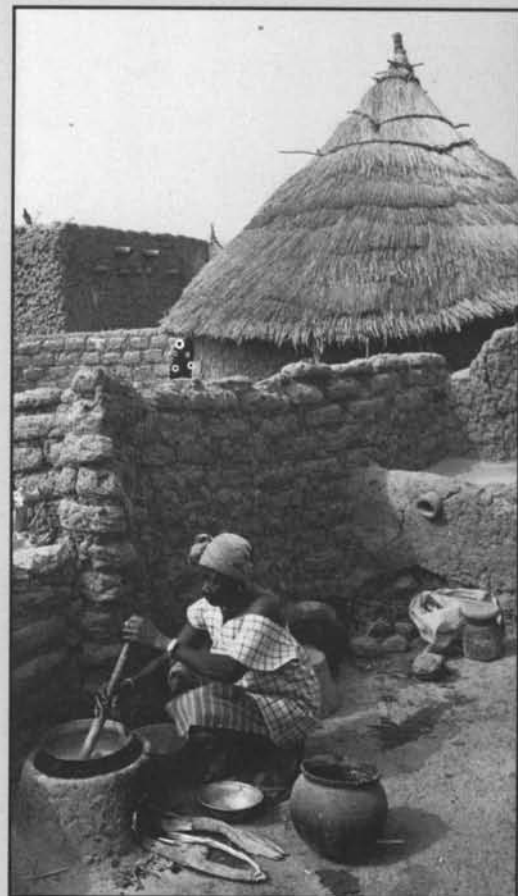
Demo Mamoudou is 17 and already has several years' experience of making a living in the informal economy. He lives with his family in Dori, the dusty capital of Seno Province in the Sahelian zone, where his father is a livestock dealer. He has one brother and two sisters.

Demo went to school until he was 10. After that he got a job in a motor mechanic's shop, where he earned the equivalent of 40-50 pence a day. Now, serving on a coffee stall in one of Dori's main streets, next to the bus station, he says he can earn up to £1.00 a day and sometimes more. If indeed his take-home pay comes to five pounds a week, that's already double the income of the average Burkinabè.

On the morning we visited him, Demo had bought 40 small baguettes of French bread, and by eight o'clock all but four of them had been sold. This represented a profit of about 40 pence. He had also sold some 40 glasses of milk, making a profit of two pence on each, to be shared with the stall owner. The stall itself is a wooden bench and a table beside the road. The coffee is Nescafé.

Demo gets up before daybreak to be at the stall by 5 am, when the town has already come to life. He works the breakfast trade until 9 am and then takes a break until after lunch. Back again at 2 pm, he is on the stall till midnight — altogether a 14-hour working day.

For entertainment, Demo goes to the cinema sometimes when he has an evening off. He takes his work seriously and is not interested in trying to get rich quick by joining the diggers at one of the gold-rush sites near Dori. After all, he pointed out, the equipment is expensive and you also have to pay for the water for panning. Then, if in the end you don't find any gold, you are worse off than before.



Women's business: brewing dôlo (beer made from millet).

(Mark Edwards/Oxfam)

