

GOLD AT ANY PRICE

Tens of thousands of the poor and hungry have been drawn across Burkina's desert fringe by the lure of gold.

On the way to Fété-Kolé there is scarcely a landmark from one horizon to the other — just bare, stony land with a scattering of dry shrubs and thorn trees. Occasionally we pass one or two people on foot, a few goats, and then, from out of nowhere, a splendid camel bearing two men attired in rich robes: the one in front wearing a fez-like hat gleaming with gold embroidery, the one behind carrying a shiny leather briefcase. They disappear, almost like a mirage, in the dust behind us.

Eventually the mounds of excavated ore around Fété-Kolé come into view. The settlement consists of makeshift shacks, built from a few pieces of wood and covered with mats woven from millet stalks. Living conditions are harsh. There is no sanitation. A flock of vultures, silhouetted against the sky, look from a distance like leaves on a dead tree.

Whole families come here to seek their fortune, or merely survival. The young men hack out the ore from the ground; the old ones, the women and the children sit on the ground pounding the stones to pieces, grinding them to dust and then panning for the magic metal.

The government has given the gold-diggers a free rein, on condition that they sell exclusively to the state. In fact, that condition is widely ignored. The diggers do provide the government with a revenue of £6 million a year, but the price they receive — £5 per gram — is well below the market rate in neighbouring countries. As a result, anything up to 80 per cent of the gold dug at these sites is smuggled abroad. This loss to the Burkina treasury is further compounded by the fact that the prospectors' crude techniques are able to extract less than half the actual gold content of the ore. Given that gold, on the official trade alone, has now overtaken cotton and livestock as the country's principal export, the lack of effective control and management of this key resource amounts to a serious economic haemorrhage.

The one fully industrial goldmine, at Poura, with reserves of 22 tons and possibly much more, is owned 60 per cent by the government and 40 per cent by foreign interests. But it has been accused of neo-colonial management practices, with the lion's share of pay and profits going to expatriates.

At Asakane, not far from Gorom-Gorom in the Oudalan, the conditions of the gold-diggers are if anything worse than at Fété-Kolé. There was no settlement at Asakane until 1985, when one family discovered gold by chance. Now, in the dry season, up to 25,000 people cram into the area and quick money has disrupted the social fabric with crime, drug-taking and prostitution. Some observers estimate that four out of every five prostitutes at Asakane carry the AIDS virus. The lack of sanitation has also encouraged epidemics of measles, malaria, meningitis, yellow fever and respiratory infections. With only two water pumps for the whole population, some prospectors have dug their own wells, but the contaminated water only spreads diarrhoeal diseases, cholera, typhoid and conjunctivitis.

Often excavating through solid rock, the Asakane miners dig holes 30 metres deep or more. Some days they may be lucky and find one or two grams, but more often they get nothing. Many take drugs to enable them to keep working round the clock; they even drug the donkeys which carry the ore. Squatting beside their huts, men with dust-whitened faces and the blank expression of zombies shake and shake their sieves. A bit further along the dirt road there are market stalls selling motorbikes, videos, radiocassettes and furniture. The contrasts are painful, and yet the mask-like faces seem to be saying: 'This may be hell, but at least there's some kind of hope here. Show us a better way to escape the bonds of our poverty.'

Panning for gold near Kalsaka, Yatenga province.

(Mark Edwards/Oxfam)



HOLDING UP HALF THE SKY

A woman's life in the Sahel is a more relentless struggle — against hunger, against sickness, against social inferiority, against natural disasters — than almost anywhere else on earth. When she is born in rural Burkina Faso, she can't expect to live much beyond 40. She has a 1-in-15 chance of going to school at all, and less than a one per cent chance of reaching secondary school. She starts work at an early age, gets married and will have an average of seven children. At least one of them will probably die in infancy. Her working hours are often twice as long as those of a man.

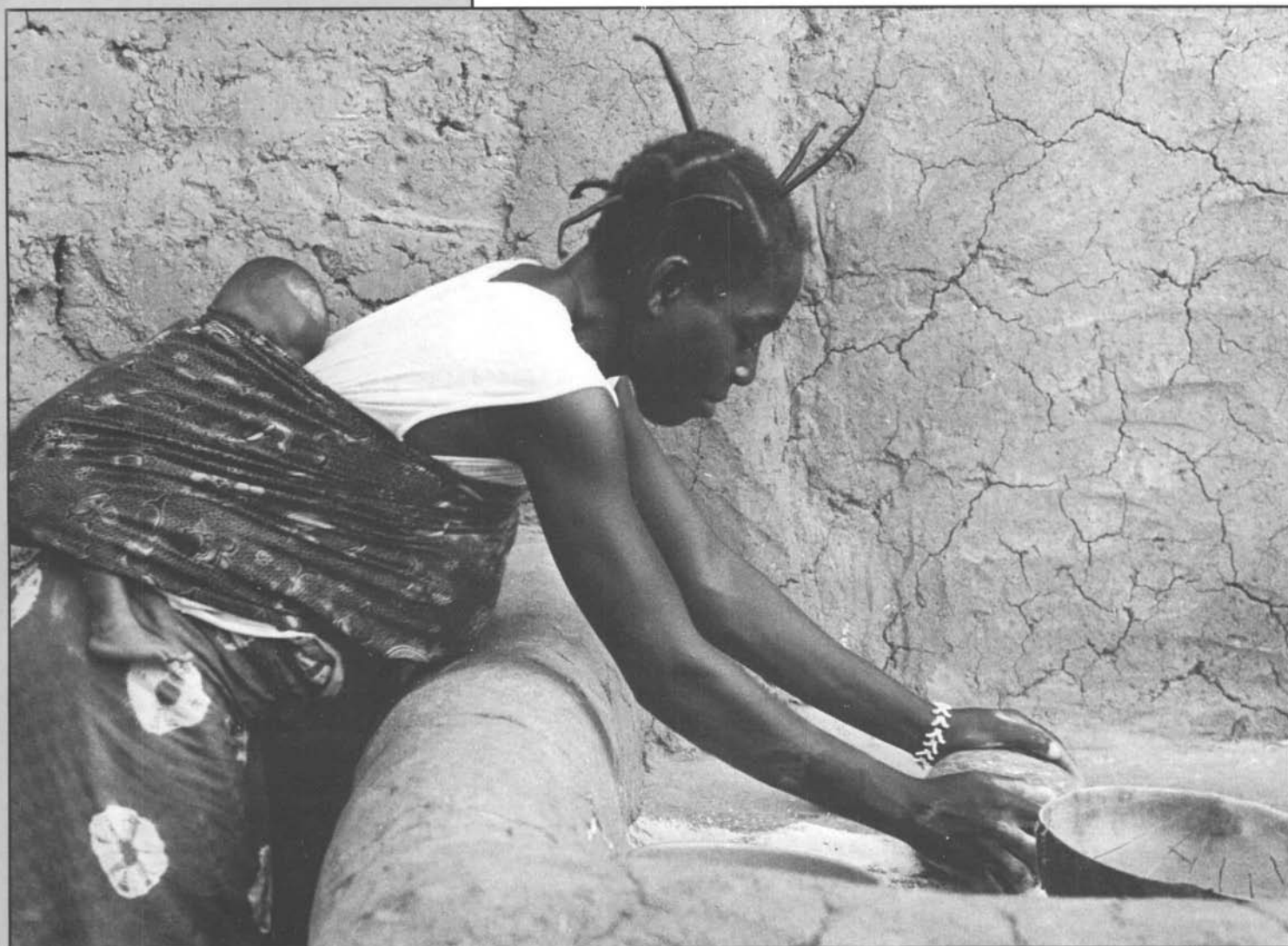
In his speech defining the political orientation of the revolution in 1983, Thomas Sankara proclaimed that women 'hold up the other half of the sky'. It was his commitment to emancipating them from the system of slavery which he said women had endured for thousands of years. Sankara denounced polygamy and the traditions of social and family organisation which reduced women to being 'beasts of burden', and he urged them to stand up for themselves against exploitative, feudal husbands.

Sadly, Sankara's rhetoric produced few practical reforms. When a National Women's Week presented him with a list of concrete ideas, including a family code with a minimum legal age for marriage and the outlawing of forced marriages, they went unheeded. Instead, Sankara launched fruitless campaigns against prostitution and female circumcision. Nevertheless, his impassioned appeals to Burkinabè women to assert their rights may have had a more lasting impact than any legislation in changing their image of themselves. Inspired by his oratory, women gained confidence in the value of their work and started to insist that their menfolk respect it. The results may be detected in the fact that many local women's groups have sprung up in recent times, perhaps to run a village mill or to organise a handicrafts co-operative.



A Lobi woman walking to market in Gaoua, near Bobo-Dioulasso.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)



**Grinding millet for the evening meal,
Noogo village, Yatenga province.**

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

But while much of the daily toil is common to all women of the Sahel — tending crops, pounding grain, gathering wood and water, caring for the family — there is a marked difference between ethnic groups in their personal freedom and social status. Once married, for example, a Mossi woman has little economic or social independence; she is traditionally under the strict control of her husband, who considers this essential to ensure her fidelity. Besides working in his fields, it is her responsibility to feed and clothe the children.

By contrast, among the Lobi people in the south west of the country, women have a large measure of independence and freedom of movement. Theirs is a matrilinear culture, tracing the family line through mother rather than father — something which is common in the region among people from the forest zones. Not only do Lobi children take their mother's family name and belong to her clan, but a husband cannot claim exclusive rights to fathering his wife's children. Lobi women are active in trade and would never think of telling their husbands how much they earn. And while he is required to provide his wife with food, she has no obligation to serve him meals.

In society at large, equality for women is coming nearer, but slowly. It conflicts with deeply-rooted social traditions, which tend to inhibit change. Change, nevertheless, is occurring; the basic question is how fast the social fabric can absorb it without being torn apart.

THE GRIOT'S THIRD WIFE

This is the brief history of a girl called Batuma, who lives in Ouagadougou.

At a young age, Batuma was given in marriage to a *griot* (a traditional story-teller), who already had two wives. She now has three small children. Batuma does not know how old she is and has never gone to school.

Her husband's income is irregular, so she and her co-wives have to support themselves and their children. Batuma earns a little money by frying doughnuts and yams for sale on the street. She also takes on extra chores such as washing bedclothes for a hotel in the neighbourhood.

Her home consists of two small rooms in a yard, in a district where the buildings are under threat of demolition. She does not have a kitchen, so she prepares food under a tree in the yard, buying firewood daily for the purpose. Sometimes she can manage only one meal a day; otherwise, if she has been able to save some coal, she will heat up leftovers in the evening. Occasionally she is given a little coal by a neighbour who brews *dôlo*.

Batuma cannot afford to vary her children's diet. Mostly she cooks *tô* with sauce made from okra and leaves. She has a few hens, but they seem to be suffering from some sickness and she is not sure they will survive. If they die, she says, she will use them to make stew.

WISHING FOR HEALTH AND POWER

'When we go to bed, our prayer is to wake up healthy,' and on waking, to have enough to eat.'

It is Mrs Aguierra Ouédraogo speaking. She is president of the Women's Group in the village of Titao, in northern Yatenga Province. The Group has convened a special meeting for our visit and laid out an impressive display of the produce they sell: dried fish and onions, tomato powder, sesame biscuits, and a variety of cakes.

What would the women of Titao most wish for, to improve their lives? — 'My wish would be to have a bit of power to change things, to help other members of my family and people who are ill or handicapped.'

Who has that power? — 'Wende.' (God)

But in this world? — 'In this world it's men who have the power, and it's right that they do, because they have the experience and they travel a lot. If we could do the same, that would be the ideal — to go to the big towns, to meetings and so on. But for the time being we go no further than this market.'

Do you think that can change? — 'We can reach the ideal if men give us the freedom. Meanwhile, we can go some way towards it in meetings like this, because unity is strength.'

The women of Titao split off from the overall Village Group when they realised they were never free if they worked with the men, who took all the decisions. They formed sub-groups and went to each other's houses to share work, then had the idea of hiring out their labour as a group. Profits are held by the Group, which then makes grants to members when they have special needs. To strengthen their activities, the Women's Group sought help from Oxfam, which is now supporting their work.

The Group meets twice a month. It now has 90 members and more want to join. Even the men are satisfied, they say, partly because there are some things which they recognise women can do better, and also because they are earning money and their husbands have less need to support them.

But Mrs Ouédraogo's nightly prayer for health reflects a harsh reality. In the poverty of these dryland settlements, sickness is the dreaded spectre at everyone's door. At any given time, only 40 of the Women's Group's 90 members are healthy enough to work, and probably half of those will be pregnant. Family planning, then? Well, that was something that had been brought by whites. They were not convinced: afraid it could have side effects. Anyway, someone joked, things had been so hard this year the men wouldn't have any strength left for reproductive activities. That got a good laugh all round.



Titao village, Yatenga province: Mrs Aguierra Ouédraogo winnowing millet.
(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)



Women pounding karité nuts to make shea nut butter, Noogo village, Yatenga province.
(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

WORDS DON'T COME EASY ...

Undoubtedly, Burkina Faso's richest resource is its people. According to the World Bank, Burkina stands out in the region for the quality of its men and women, who, it says, are well reputed for their diligence, resourcefulness and adaptability. But long-term prosperity, the Bank adds, will depend on their capacity to adopt new techniques, new tools, new products.

That is the narrow economic view. Advancement will also depend, more fundamentally, on their ability to participate in the *process* of development, to understand what is going on, and to contribute to the decisions that affect their lives. To comprehend the scale of the challenge facing their government, it is enough to know that five out of six Burkinabès could not read a word on this page, even if it were written in their own language. Reading, writing and a basic education are what, more than anything, separate Burkina's privileged classes from their seven-and-a-half million illiterate compatriots.

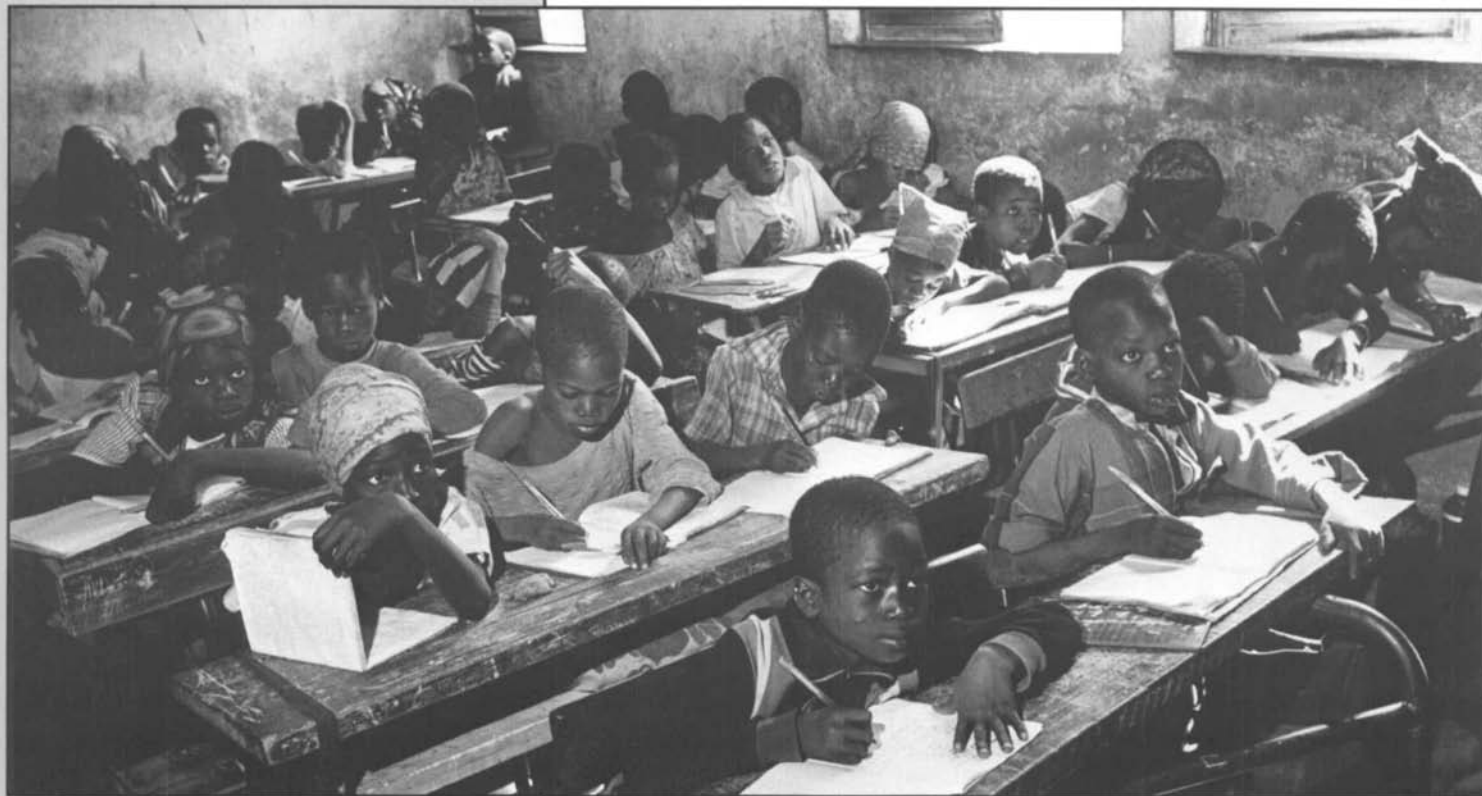
The government has made sustained efforts to improve literacy rates. In the 13 years up to 1988, some 340,000 people were given training, but in the early years many soon forgot what they had learned. Today, many students joining the 'Operation Alpha' literacy campaign are more keenly motivated, but there is still a serious lack of printed material in their own language to sustain new readers. There is only one occasional magazine in the most widely spoken national language, Mooré, and in fact illiteracy is growing rather than declining, as a result of population growth. Among women, who are the most underprivileged, the literacy rate in rural areas is as low as two per cent.

In terms of formal education, Burkina faces a huge uphill task. Only slightly more than a quarter of the country's children are able to find school places — one of the lowest enrolment rates in Africa. The current target is to raise enrolment to 40 per cent by 1996.

In fact, great strides have been made since the revolution. In five years, more than 1,000 schools were built by townspeople and villagers under the programme of popular mobilisation, raising the primary school intake by 150,000, and more than doubling the numbers in secondary schools. But at the present rate of education spending, it will still be more than a century before all children can find a school place.

Despite a national school-building campaign since the revolution, places are available for fewer than half the children of Burkina.

(Mark Edwards/Oxfam)



A LIMITED RIGHT TO KNOW

There has been only one brand of public information available until now in Burkina: the government's own. Attempts to establish independent media outlets were abruptly stamped on. The government-controlled, French-language *Sidwaya* is the sole daily newspaper, with a circulation of about 4,000 copies. Its title means 'Here's The Truth', but the Burkinabès, like the British, enjoy playing with words. Some subversive wits renamed it *Zirwaya* — 'Here Are The Lies'.

Outsiders often criticise African governments for preventing a free flow of information to their people. And at one level, such criticism is presumptuous, when the countries concerned have only 30 years of nationhood behind them and a largely illiterate population. Many Northern governments differ only in the sophistication with which they suppress things they don't want the people to know.

At another level, however, many African commentators agree that the people's lack of access to independent information stifles their energies and the contribution they could make to national development. Censorship, by protecting those in power, also protects corruption and incompetence, as well as presenting a distorted mirror of reality.

In Burkina there are signs of change: in mid-1990 a new Information Code became law, legalising public debate in the information media. A private radio station, which had been banned a year earlier for refusing to broadcast official communiqués, was planning to reopen.

Apart from *Sidwaya*, there is one newspaper in the main national language, Mooré, which appears a few times a year. But the print media reach only one person in 5,000, whereas almost every family by now has a transistor radio. The national radio service broadcasts 100 hours a week, but more than half of its output is in French — understood by only a small proportion of the population — while 16 national languages get an average of no more than three hours each. Community groups are now at least getting better access to the airwaves of the Rural Radio Service, which broadcasts village debates, music and entertainment, and programmes for women. Thursday is the day for rural radio broadcasts in Burkina, and, in the words of one of its presenters, Seydou Drame, 'The farmer gets on his bicycle and rides off to his field with a hoe, some water, and his radio, to keep him company while he works. It's up to us to keep him interested, because if he gets bored he can turn to Radio Mali, Radio Benin, or Africa 1. By giving people access to the airwaves themselves, we're discovering the need for a peasant-to-peasant dialogue.' The first two of six local radio stations are also in operation, funded by their local communities and with technical support but no finance from central government.



**Goumba village, Yatenga province:
listening to the radio while making rope
from the threads of nylon sacks.**

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

BULLETS BEFORE BANDAGES



**Primary health post, Noogo village,
Yatenga province.**

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

An old man in the village is sick. He tries to ignore the pain, knowing he cannot afford the cost of modern treatment, and hoping the ailment will cure itself. Instead it gets worse, so he goes to seek out the traditional doctor in the village, whose herbal remedies have sometimes worked in the past. This time they don't, and he is by now very ill. As a last resort he appeals to members of his family for help to get to the nearest doctor or health centre, perhaps 50 kilometres away. But it's been a bad season, many others have been sick and his relatives have no help left to give. The old man returns to his hut; there is nothing more to do. He lies down, maybe to die.

Stories such as this are an everyday reality in rural Burkina. In a country of 7,200 villages there are only 154 dispensaries and 20 maternity units; one doctor for every 31,000 people, one pharmacist for every 85,000. Most health care is still located in the cities, even though in 1985 the Sankara government launched a big campaign to shift resources to the rural areas.

The government's most spectacular success was the massive operation 'Vaccination Commando' in which nearly three million children were vaccinated against measles, meningitis and yellow fever. The first two of these, together with malaria and diarrhoeal diseases, are the principal killers in a country where the infant mortality rate is 134 per thousand. But another commando-style health operation — to establish a primary health care post (PSP) in every village of the country — soon began to fall apart after an initial fever of activity. One voluntary agency which had hoped to support the PSP programme attributed its failure to a number of causes: lack of preparation, poor choice of village health agents, who were often illiterate, and lack of supervision. In addition, supplies of simple equipment and medicines promised to the PSPs often didn't arrive. Many of the posts have since closed.

Inept planning may deserve its share of blame, but the bare fact is that health care has not been given the priority it needs in government budgeting to reach the majority of people with even minimal services. One example: only five per cent of the rural population have access to a toilet, and only one person in three has a source of clean drinking water. Use of stagnant or contaminated water is the cause of many illnesses.

But while the country's population has been growing rapidly, expenditure on health has slumped from 10 per cent of the national budget in the mid-1970s to 6.2 per cent in 1987. Over approximately the same period, military spending has soared from 11.5 to 19 per cent of the national budget. The priorities of the Revolution are statistically clear: bullets before bandages. For its part, the World Bank is encouraging the government to allocate more resources to the health sector. Yet in its two volumes of recommendations for restructuring the Burkina economy, the Bank has not one word to say about possible economies in military spending, which devours one-fifth of all the money in the government's coffers. Some things, evidently, are still sacrosanct.

THE PRESSURE OF NUMBERS

Burkina Faso is a young country, not only in the political sense but especially in the youth of its people. At the start of the 1990s, almost half of the population are under the age of 15. With a progressive reduction in infant mortality rates over the past two decades, and with so many young people now approaching child-bearing age, population policy will be critical if they are to have any kind of sustainable future.

Since 1985, the government has promoted family planning as an integral part of maternal and child health care. Laws forbidding the advertising of contraceptives were abolished in 1986, and family planning policy in general is considered more progressive than in most other African countries. Resistance to family planning is said to come largely from men, fearing the freedom it might give their womenfolk; but in the villages quite a lot of older men — their wives perhaps past child-bearing age — now say it's the only way they can see of reducing pressures on the land caused by the ever-growing number of mouths to feed. One of the problems, pointed out by older people of both sexes, is that the younger generation no longer observes the traditional rule of restraint whereby husbands were supposed to ensure at least three years' spacing between their wives' children. Taboos such as this have lost their force as the old patterns of family and tribal authority disintegrate. It is one small example of how the outside world, with its seductive messages of modernisation, has disrupted the delicate balances of forces on which survival here depends.

In the colonial period and right up to independence, Burkina was seen by the French administration as an ideal reservoir of labour for their plantations, construction sites and other enterprises in the neighbouring colony of Ivory Coast. For a time, a system of forced labour was even introduced to ensure a sufficient supply of manpower. By now, it is estimated, nearly one-third of the Ivory Coast's population is of Burkinabè origin. There was also a steady migration of young men to the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in search of money to pay the bride price or buy land back home.

Still today, about three-quarters of a million Burkinabès are working abroad at any one time, though numbers have been declining as the coastal states themselves feel the pinch of hard times. The money that the migrants send home, currently totalling £56 million a year, represents a sizeable chunk of the nation's income. It also gives the returning émigrés — mostly younger men — an importance in their village which they could not have had in former times, when the traditional authority of the elders held sway.

With four out of every ten of the adult male population now working abroad, the women left at home obviously have to carry extra burdens. They are responsible for looking after their husbands' land and livestock, without ever having the right to acquire land for their own security.

In recent years an international campaign to eradicate river blindness in Burkina and the surrounding region has opened up new fertile lands in the south west of the country for migrants from the drought-stricken Sahel. Yet as these migratory flows continue and shift, the most acute pressure in the coming generation seems certain to be on the towns and cities. Twenty years ago the capital, Ouagadougou, was a modest mudbrick town of 100,000 souls. At the start of the 1990s it is home to half a million, and in a mere 20 years more it is expected to reach 1,550,000.



Family planning sign in Gaoua, near Bobo-Dioulasso.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)



CONCRETE REPLACES MUD — BUT WHO CAN AFFORD IT?

More than half the urban areas of Burkina consist of spontaneous, unplanned settlements where people have simply moved in and built their own houses or shacks on open land. They are do-it-yourself shanty towns with little in the way of sanitation or other services. And on top of the pressures created by the doubling of Ouagadougou's population in the past ten years, in the Sahel as a whole the number of people living in towns is expected to quadruple by the year 2010.

To cope with acute housing needs in the capital, the government in 1984 initiated a major building programme, aiming to redevelop one section of the city for each year of the revolution. 'Homes for the People' was the slogan. But the choice of costly building techniques meant that average rentals in Third Year City had to be set at £70 a month, far beyond the reach of the average Burkinabè.

A more promising approach is the sites-and-services scheme designed to permit planned development for the whole of Ouagadougou. Under this plan, parcels of land — 300 or 400 square metres — are allocated in the squatter settlements, as far as possible to their existing occupants. In return for a fee of £50 and an undertaking to upgrade their homes, they get a residency permit and a promise of basic services. By the end of 1987, some 60,000 parcels had been allocated, but at a high cost to the people. The new boundaries seldom coincided with their old ones, so many had to rebuild: their savings were wiped out and they had to start again. Many of the poorest, and those with no existing buildings on their land, were forced out altogether.

Meanwhile, a frenzy of construction activity is rapidly transforming the centre of Ouagadougou, with its low mudbrick buildings and wide avenues, into a mini-metropolis of concrete and glass. For many international aid agencies with their regional headquarters here, Ouaga since the drought of the 1970s has been the unofficial capital of the Sahel, and it seems determined to consolidate that status. More than £60 million has been invested in the current building boom, two-thirds of it by the government for new offices and housing. The splendid new central market, Rood Woko, completed in 1988, alone cost £10 million.

The nagging question, however, is whether such an undeveloped agricultural country can really afford all this expensive centralised infrastructure. It's true that until recently Burkina has indulged less in extravagant construction projects than many other African countries — and that a sizeable chunk of current building investment is said to come from individual Burkinabès who have been accumulating funds in Ivory Coast. Nevertheless, the extent of government financing of the building boom begins to look disproportionate when only a small proportion of foreign aid, and less than five per cent of the government's own budget, is devoted to the agriculture on which four-fifths of its people depend.



A common sight in Ouagadougou's commercial zone.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

POWER FOR THE PEOPLE IS STILL FIREWOOD

With electricity a luxury confined to the few major towns, the average Burkinabè household depends on firewood for 90 per cent of its energy needs — for cooking, for heating bath water, for brewing dôlo beer and for other income-earning activities such as textile-dyeing. Which means that each adult needs about a kilo of wood — the equivalent of one small log — every day. For the country as a whole, therefore, four million logs a day: a measure of the basic human needs which have to be confronted in the struggle against deforestation.

Since the government introduced controls on wood-cutting, people in some areas have been increasingly forced to burn millet straw, other crop residues and sometimes cow dung — resources which could otherwise be used to help regenerate their soil. So measures to save the trees may have the effect of impoverishing the earth: sometimes it seems there is a Catch-22 in every attempt to rationalise the development process.

At the beginning of the 1980s, after the second major leap in world oil prices, Burkina found that nearly three-quarters of all its export earnings were being eaten up by energy imports. When Sankara came to power, it was decided to construct a hydro-electric dam, which, it was reckoned, would meet 20-30 per cent of the nation's power requirements and save over £4 million on its annual fuel bill. The Kompienga dam, on the southern border with Ghana, cost £73 million and was completed in 1988, on time and within budget. Apart from the electricity output, its artificial lake is designed to irrigate 2,000 hectares for agriculture. The planners say it could also produce 1,500 tons of fish a year.

Now work has begun on a second and even more ambitious hydro-electric scheme — the Bagré dam — which, in a sparsely populated area of Boulgou province, aims ultimately to irrigate 30,000 hectares and provide settlements with a livelihood for 120,000 people. The authorities say they intend to involve the new peasant-settlers in developing the project, building 23 small villages in the first phase up to 1993. According to the technical director, each village will house members of one ethnic group and will have control over its own land. Settlers will farm in the traditional way to meet their own food needs, and use the irrigated land to grow rice for sale.

There are plans for an even bigger dam on the Mouhoun River on the border with Ghana, which would have an output equal to Kompienga and Bagré combined. The price-tag is £200 million, but Nounbiel would make the country virtually self-sufficient in energy at the beginning of the next century — that is, provided the water supply from rainfall does not decline. In fact, the predicted general impact of global warming is a movement of climatic zones from the equator towards the poles, and if that applies here, it could improve the prospects for hydro power.

There are, however, other questions about the viability and the environmental impact of large dam projects. Fisheries in the dams of Lake Volta, Ghana, and Lake Kariba, Zambia, started off with impressive catches, but later declined rapidly as lake vegetation rotted away and fish stocks fell. Elsewhere, problems of salinity and waterlogging on irrigated land have drastically reduced agricultural productivity, while large dams have proved good breeding grounds for the black fly which carries the worm causing river blindness. The problems likely to arise with Burkina's hydro-power programme are still incubating.



Buying charcoal from the government-controlled store in Ouagadougou. One sack costs £1.30. The wood comes from Kompienga, on the Togo border; only licensed traders can sell it.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)



GETTING ABOUT

For people in the countryside, a donkey cart or a push-bike is the main means of transport. With pot-holed tracks seldom repaired and made worse in the rainy season, even getting to the nearest town — for medical care or to take produce to market — can be an arduous undertaking. Between towns there are bush taxis — rickety wagons squashing in passengers and their belongings like sardines — or sometimes regular bus services. Burkina has 13,000 km of roads, of which a little more than one-tenth are surfaced; the rest are dirt tracks of varying quality.

In the towns, the moped is undisputed king of the roads. Mopeds or scooters are affordable now for many with regular city jobs, who can buy petrol by the bottle from little roadside stalls. When the traffic lights turn green in Ouagadougou, the moped battalions surge across the intersections with a buzzing crescendo like a swarm of bees.

For a landlocked country shut in by six foreign states around its borders, the development of regional transport links is vital if Burkina is to reduce its isolation and its import/export costs. In fact, over the past two decades the country has built up a considerable transport infrastructure and has become a hub for much of the region's traffic. Much of it, though, is in a bad state of disrepair, and the cost of maintenance rises year by year.

The French planned a railway line from the port of Abidjan which would cross Burkina and continue eastwards to Niamey, the capital of Niger. The company to run it was called the Régie Abidjan-Niger (RAN), but the line never got further than Ouagadougou. Inherited jointly by the governments of Burkina and the Ivory Coast, RAN played an important role in Burkina's foreign trade and economic development. In recent times, however, the service has piled up huge debts and much traffic has switched to the roads. Having now been split into two separate national companies, the service is in bad shape, leading the World Bank to observe that 'radical measures urgently need to be taken to prevent the operational and financial collapse of the railway'.

Air Burkina, the national airline, has two planes providing services to neighbouring countries. It also manages the presidential Boeing 727, alleged by some to be an extravagance but which, it is said, spends most of its time on commercial lease. The first customer to rent it was pop star Michael Jackson.

Ouagadougou - where the moped reigns supreme.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)



IS ALL THIS AID DOING ANY GOOD?

A lot of people are sceptical about the benefits of foreign aid, in Burkina itself as well as outside. Official aid from foreign governments and international agencies effectively doubles the national budget of the government: in 1988 it topped US\$300 million, and there are currently 240 big aid projects in progress around the country, each with a budget of £200,000 or more. Burkina has eleven principal donors, including UN agencies, the European Community, the African Development Bank, and the governments of France, the United States, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands. After them come a string of 24 more international and government aid agencies.

In 1988 alone, Burkina had to cope with more than 700 visiting missions from the aid donors: experts wanting to discuss the government's plans, to evaluate projects in progress, to look at possible new ones, and then to evaluate some more. Seven hundred whirlwind tours by more or less knowledgeable foreigners, any one of whose opinions could have an important influence on some chunk of the country's future. Yet driving through the country, and especially in the poorest and neediest northern provinces, one is hard pressed to find evidence that the grand schemes of the past 30 years have made any real difference to people's lives.

How can this be? The hundreds of millions of francs, dollars and deutschmarks given or loaned to Burkina and other countries of the Sahel in the last three decades — have they really all been wasted? For better or worse, the answers are not so simple, but it is perhaps important to try to identify some of the factors responsible for what many admit is a fairly dismal record.

Some of the recurrent failings of official aid are well illustrated by a five-year, 29-million dollar project which was launched in the eastern region of Burkina in 1982. It aimed to increase food crop production and farmers' incomes, and to strengthen rural organisation. Financed by the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the governments of France and the United States, and the UN Development Programme, it was designed to benefit 40,000 of the poorest people in the country.

By the end of 1987, when the project was supposed to wind up, very little had been achieved. It had 'reached' more than the 8,000 farmers originally planned, but basically they weren't much interested. Fewer than 10 per cent of them had received the credits they were supposed to get to buy agricultural inputs, equipment and farm animals. Anti-erosion works covered less than half the original target area, none of the four planned



A solar-powered cooker, designed and made in Europe - without much reference to local needs: village women cook in the evenings, not at mid-day (when most heat is produced); and the pot is too small for a family meal.

(Maggie Murray/Format)



In the background: a solar-powered pump, paid for by the European Community. It fails to supply enough water, so the traditional well in the foreground, which it was meant to replace, is still in use.

(Maggie Murray/Format)

*'Even if the rich man
dances badly, one says he
dances well.' — Mossi
proverb*



dispensaries had been built, only 10 of 100 wells had been dug, and only one per cent of the funds earmarked for village enterprises had been allocated. The project was supposed to rehabilitate 1,000 hectares of land for rice production; it managed 36 hectares, which were promptly wiped out by the first flood. An evaluation report in February 1987 observed laconically: 'Project impact at this point is poor.'

Lessons from this experience can be learnt: first, the project suffered from *the techno-fix syndrome*, which occurs when the experts reckon that they are dealing with purely technical problems and that their job — what they've been paid for — is to produce the purest technical solutions. How else to explain that a project can go on misfiring for five years, at enormous cost, without anyone blowing the whistle? It is not altogether the experts' fault, but sadly, theories and sand do not mix well. *Ignorance of place and people* was the second problem: the experts didn't know the farmers or their needs, otherwise they wouldn't have been urging them to grow crops they couldn't sell. Only very late in the day did the project realise there were no adequate market outlets.

The third problem was *tunnel vision*. Projects are still too often designed in a vacuum, far from the real-life pressures and concerns of the people for whom they are intended. The planners isolate one problem for treatment, but things go wrong when the project finds that people have other ideas and priorities, and will not conform with its single-track plan.

Other official aid projects suffer from *self-interest* on the part of the donors, which means that projects are selected which best suit their commercial or other interests, rather than those which might be most use to the recipients. Projects, for example, which give them an excuse to provide their own expensive equipment, vehicles, fertilisers, and so on. Or projects from which they can cream the benefit, such as the promotion of export crops. Consequently, only a tiny fraction of official aid for the Sahel goes to develop the kind of rainfed agriculture on which 80 per cent of the people depend, and less than two per cent is given for reforestation and environmental projects.

Finally, a tendency which is sometimes called *clientelism* dictates that donors, in return for the latitude they are given in choosing projects, do not choose any that the host government would object to. Thus aid tends to reinforce the interests of governments, rather than the interests of the people.

But, as Jacques Giri, an experienced French commentator on the Sahel, has pointed out, the fundamental flaw in the whole process of official aid is that it has sought to provide the capital necessary to stimulate and sustain economic growth — as if the economy was something which could be treated separately from the complex web of cultural and social structures and relationships which go to make up any society. Maybe, he says, the assumption was that economic growth would permeate and promote change at all levels. But it hasn't worked, because Sahelian societies are not like that. The fragility of their physical environment belies a metaphysical strength and resilience which up till now has confounded all the one-dimensional strategies which the world has tried to foist upon them.

Food aid brings dubious benefits: it tends to drive down local prices and reduce farmers' incentives to grow their own produce.

(Mark Edwards/Oxfam)

WHO IS HELPING WHOM?

Since the drought of the 1970s, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have taken a front-line role in helping and working with the peasants of Burkina. The Northern NGOs, in particular, are a many-flavoured assortment of non-profit-making development agencies and church groups from Europe and North America. Some are highly professional, with many years' experience in the region; others are primarily concerned with placing volunteers to work in local communities, and others again come armed with bread and Bibles.

But people-to-people help from overseas is not now exclusively from the rich North. In one of the remotest Sahelian villages, there is the saffron-robed resident field worker of an Indian NGO, helping to develop community initiatives. Some of the villagers, he told us, are now keenly learning yoga.

As the big aid-giving countries have become more conscious of the thin results achieved by government-to-government aid, they have channelled an increasing share through their NGOs. Consequently, in many countries like Burkina, the NGOs have become the biggest fish in the pond. They are often the only ones to have the rugged, off-road vehicles necessary for getting out to the villages, and the only ones who can afford the petrol to go where they will. Government staff and extension workers have no such freedom of movement.

The Canadian Save the Children Fund has calculated that aid to Burkina Faso from all NGOs in 1986 amounted to £26 million. Though a lot higher than a United Nations estimate, if the Canadian SCF reckoning is correct, it would mean that NGOs are contributing something equivalent to 18 per cent of Burkina's national budget.

By the mid-80s there were more than 70 different foreign NGOs operating in the country. One result has been the emergence of a new breed of indigenous NGOs. The foreign agencies needed partners through whom to implement their projects, so in some cases they were instrumental in creating local organisations for the purpose; in others, it was former government officials or people educated abroad who recognised a bandwagon when they saw one and quickly climbed aboard, setting up their own associations.

Some of the best of the Burkina NGOs today, however, are exceptions to this trend. Catholic missionary orders with long experience in the country have given rise to two Burkina-based development training organisations with a widely-respected track record. CESA — the West African Centre for Economic and Social Studies — was founded by the White Fathers in 1960. Based in Bobo Dioulasso, CESA has evolved a programme of training and support for rural organisations which is highly regarded by government and voluntary organisations alike.

Working on similar lines is the *Groupe de Recherche et d'Appui pour l'Autopromotion Paysanne* (GRAAP), established by the Dominican order and likewise based in Bobo Dioulasso. And then there is the Federation of the *Groupements Naam*, which is not only an autonomous national movement but has also an authentic social base, with 200,000 peasants linked to it.



A few of the 70 foreign development agencies based in Ouagadougou share an office block with Oxfam.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)



Oxfam worker Daouda Ouédraogo helping children to plant acacia seedlings along a diguette line in Goumba village, Yatenga province. Small-scale community-based development work is the key to Oxfam's programme in Burkina.

(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

Another Burkinabè NGO within the Catholic community is a development studies centre, the *Bureau d'Etudes et de Liaison*. BEL sees the services of NGOs being more in demand than ever, because government support to the rural areas has declined. But BEL believes that the work of NGOs needs to develop a stronger economic focus. So far, it is argued, projects have concentrated on social needs; they should now give greater emphasis to helping people become productive through income-generating initiatives, and training them so they can be more independent.

This, indeed, underlines a problem faced by many indigenous Sahelian NGOs themselves. Their Northern partners will provide the funding for projects, but are seldom prepared to help with the training or institutional support needed if they are to become effective and fully-fledged development agencies. In some other countries, African NGOs are now — with justice — demanding such support as a condition for accepting project work. It ought soon to happen here, too.

FUTURE CONDITIONAL

Thinking about the future is first a consequence and then a cause of change. For the people of Burkina Faso, seeing unprecedented change all around them — encouraging, tantalising, threatening — the future is something they will have to struggle to control for themselves. What can they hope to make of it?

The first certainty is that the people of Burkina will have not one but many futures. One for the peasants, another for the town-dwellers; one for the arid north, another for the more fertile south; one for the literate, another for the rest; one for the rich, another for the poor. And all of them will reflect the cruel contradictions which beset this landlocked fragment of West Africa: the contradiction that civil society is beginning to find a new dynamism just as it faces a crisis of drastically diminishing options; the contradiction that steps to increase the country's self-sufficiency in one domain plunge it deeper into dependency of some other kind. There are other paradoxes, too — not least that of the country's 'revolutionary capitalist' leadership — and how they resolve themselves will determine the futures available for the people.

Global warming may bring more or less drought in the next 25 years. We just don't know. The hundreds of self-help land-reclamation schemes which at best might conceivably herald a renaissance of the Sahel could equally be wiped out by increasingly erratic weather forcing the abandonment of habitation in the arid zone.

As for what is controllable, many economists and aid planners assert that Burkina and other countries of the Sahel will need even larger doses of foreign assistance over the next 20 years. They maintain that substantial increases in aid and investment will be needed, just to keep these countries alive and to give them some chance of making their economies viable. But this kind of medicine, others argue, risks being worse than the disease. It should be decreased, they say, not stepped up, because conventional forms of government-to-government aid tend to lead resource-poor countries like Burkina into ever greater debt and dependency. Unless an entirely new structure can be devised to supervise resource transfers from North to South (and there is no sign of it at present), Burkina could in due course find itself in the same trap as many Third World countries today — having to pay out substantially more each year to Northern creditors than they receive in aid.

The first of these analyses is the one most likely to prevail, because it suits the vested interests of both donor and recipient countries. The revolution under Sankara tried to go the other way — the route of self-reliance — but Compaoré has decided to play the game by World Bank rules. One of the main fears of African governments now is that the recent dramatic developments in eastern Europe will prompt aid-giving western countries to cut their losses in Africa and concentrate on the new opportunities for investment there.

So the future is conditional on many crucial *ifs*. It is a future fraught with peril, even if that is nothing new for people who have survived half a lifetime of drought and famines. Some will succumb, but one way or another the spirit and will of the people of Burkina will endure, and one is left with the memory of that Yatenga village and its peasant leader, Guiro Mahama, declaring defiantly: *'Now we are dynamic and determined to go ahead. You can't help a man who is asleep, but we are awake, standing up and determined to progress.'*

**A girl of the Bella tribe in Gorom-
Gorom, Oudalan province.**
(Jeremy Hartley/Oxfam)

