The Sahel Oral History Project

Oral history is both a methodology and an academic discipline. It has not yet been widely used in a development context. One aim of the Sahel Oral History Project was to explore how the application of oral history techniques can assist the development process. By talking at length with farmers, pastoralists, refugees and other groups, we hoped to gain a better understanding of traditional land-use practice, land tenure, farming and pastoral systems, the causes of desertification, and many other aspects of Sahelian life. Our aim was not only to record indigenous knowledge and improve rapport with those with whom SOS Sahel and its partner agencies work, but also to develop a practical methodology which could then be incorporated into development planning, project implementation and evaluation.

We do not claim that At the Desert's Edge and its supplementary material will become a seminal text for historians of Africa. In most of the places where we worked, there was no written record to support or contradict the oral testimony. In some instances it was possible to record the first tentative outlines of village histories, but this, though fascinating, was peripheral. The principal aim was to record the perceptions of Sahelian men and women—which are neither right nor wrong—about their changing environment and way of life. All history is informed by someone’s testimony—his or her story. We did not set out to accumulate facts, but rather to find the stories, to improve the techniques for their collection and, most important of all, to demonstrate their value and utility.

The pace of change
Social change in the Sahel has been rapid. Many children now have access to formal education. While this may increase their own economic prospects, it also leads to a loss of cultural continuity. Traditional knowledge is considered “out-of-date” by young villagers as well as outsiders. Recording traditional...

"In some ways we have remained passive in the face of all the change that has gone on around us—we have felt out of our depth," was Obo Koné’s comment on the rapidity of change in the Sahel.
knowledge both rescues it from oblivion and demonstrates its value to a younger generation. Environmental and economic pressures in the Sahel have combined to create a period of unprecedented social dislocation. Academic analysis of economic, social and physical change, while it may be objective, lacks the authenticity of first-hand testimony and fails to capture the important subjective aspects of these upheavals.

Not the least of our concerns has been to offer alternatives to the received image of Sahelians as passive, grateful beneficiaries who have been helped to fish or farm (the aid agency cover photo), by giving some 500 men and women—classic development “targets”—the chance to talk back and to broadcast their experiences, priorities and perspectives.

We have not edited out the tragedies or the disasters as these are graphically described by those who have lived through them, but the same witnesses demonstrate their ingenuity and tenacity, and reflect on the “good life”. The interviews reveal the complexity of everyday Sahelian life: people’s relationship to and care of the environment; the position of men and women on the land and in the household; and changes in family relationships and social customs. As the interviews make clear, these individuals are neither emaciated victims nor happy peasants. They are themselves.

THE PROCESS
The preliminary research, identification of sites, liaison with other agencies and development of a questionnaire were carried out between January and May 1989. The interviewing began that June and continued until October 1990. Over 500 interviews were completed, of which just under half were with women. A small proportion were group interviews, bringing the total number of respondents to more than 650. The project worked in eight countries—Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Sudan and Ethiopia—at 19 sites, in 17 languages.

From the outset, interview sites were linked to ongoing development projects. This strategy provided participating agencies with new, village-authored extension and evaluation materials and the Sahel Oral History Project with a ready-made base. Although it is never easy for development agencies to provide such support, there was a high level of cooperation. As a control, interviews were also conducted in non-project areas. In general, project sites were easier to work in—the relationship that had already been established between the project and the people proved an enormous asset.

A major consideration in the selection of interview sites was that they
should cover a range of tribal, economic and social groups. These were divided into five main categories:

- refugees (political and economic): Eritreans and Tigreans in Sudan, ex-pastoralists in Nouakchott, Mauritania
- pastoralists and agro-pastoralists in Mali, Niger, Chad and Ethiopia
- farmers in rainfed areas in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Sudan and Ethiopia
- farmers in irrigated riverine areas in Senegal and Sudan
- fishermen in Mauritania and Chad

We chose interviewers from extension workers, research students and local journalists; inevitably a mixture of luck, judgment and availability circumscribed our choice. The most successful interviewers were good communicators who had a natural curiosity and interest in the respondents. In terms of grasping the complexity of some of the questions and to ensure effective transcription and translation, a relatively high level of education and literacy was essential. Given the nature of the fieldwork—with the inevitable frustrations created by limited transport, inaccessibility of interviewees and difficult living conditions—the energy and enthusiasm of the interviewer was as important as previous interviewing experience. Undoubtedly the most successful interviewers were those who had a thorough knowledge of the area and, in most cases, had been born and brought up within it. They could, in the fullest sense of the phrase, "speak the same language".

Finding the right questions

The first task of the project was to prepare a guide for interviewers outlining a standard methodology, together with a draft questionnaire. Initial research for the guidelines involved consultation with development agencies and academics. An interview outline was tested in Sudan. Further consultation, and feedback from interviewers, led to a number of changes. In addition, discussions were held with development workers on each interviewing site prior to the work, in order to establish their own priorities.

To draw up a questionnaire which can be used effectively in many different countries, even though they share common problems and conditions, is a near impossible task. Questions which would strike a European as being neutral and rather mundane, such as "How many children do you have?", may prove offensive. To divulge such facts to a stranger may tempt fate—an open invitation to God to take a child away.
A cultural bias in the interview outline was inevitable—we saw the project as having a development education role and so were seeking to inform a Northern public as well as an “expert” audience. We found ourselves seeking answers to questions which members of the community concerned might never have thought to ask. To balance our concerns, interviewers were given scope to exclude anything they felt unsuitable, and encouraged to include questions of their own design. Similarly, questions were added or subtracted depending on the specific country or site and according to the prevailing political, social and environmental conditions.

**Working with women**

Most of the Sahelian countries in which we were working have strong cultural and religious influences which tend to restrict the movement of women and inhibit easy communication between the sexes. To avoid marginalising women, one male and one female interviewer were sought for each site. But employing women proved much more difficult than men, largely because of cultural constraints restricting their freedom to travel. Women interviewers had less work experience than men and generally needed more training and confidence building.

Despite the extra work involved, the policy of employing women proved critical to the success of the project. On a number of occasions, as an experiment, men were asked to interview women and women to interview men. Their comments on this experience were enlightening. Women generally found the interviews ran smoothly. The men, on the other hand, appeared at a loss to know what to ask women and their questions quickly dried up. Some said that they found talking to women boring and unenlightening, but it is also possible that male respondents found women interviewers less intimidating than the other way round.

As interviewees, women again required a higher investment of both time and energy. In the first place, they were harder to involve since their domestic chores could rarely be postponed—there was always grain to grind, wood to collect or a meal to prepare, and they preferred to be interviewed while continuing their chores. Men were more inclined to lay down the task at hand, benefiting from a male culture which sets aside time and space for communal debate. They generally talked with greater ease for long periods of time without faltering, whereas women usually needed much more encouragement. Women also tended to reflect less critically on their life situation, attributing their hardships to fate rather than external factors, making it more difficult for the interviewer to follow up further lines of questioning.
Problems sometimes arose from men wanting to take over or disrupt interviews with women. Men would decide that they should act as mediators between their wives (or other female relatives) and the interviewer. In some cases it appeared that the woman was reassured by male encouragement; at other times the consequences were disastrous, with the woman feeling unable to talk about certain issues and the man asserting that he knew the woman’s mind better than she. It was also noticeable that men often laughed at the questions to women and the women’s responses, whereas they took their own contributions much more seriously.

Training
The time allocated to interviewing in each country was about one month. In this period interviewers were recruited by the project coordinator and the actual interview process was completed on two to three different sites. Within this tight schedule, a short three-day training programme was devised which proved an invaluable component of the work.

The first day of training was spent on a thorough review of the questionnaire outline and guidelines, together with some role play where the new interviewer would test interviewing methods and also play the part of respondent. On the second day the coordinator carried out the first one or two interviews, using the interviewer as an interpreter. The flexibility of the interview structure was stressed, with the coordinator demonstrating the value of follow-up questions. On the third day a sample interview was conducted, transcribed and analysed.

Selection
On each site we sought to interview roughly equal numbers of men and women. Initially, interviews were exclusively with the elderly, but as the project progressed it became clear that it would be useful to include younger people in each sample to allow comparisons between the differing perceptions of two generations.

Before interviewing began, those helping to facilitate the work were asked to identify the different economic, social and ethnic groups in the community, to ensure the interviewers covered as wide a spectrum as possible and were not simply choosing to talk to close friends, neighbours or relatives. While the majority of the interviewees were farmers or pastoralists, we also sought specialist occupations such as midwife, hunter, traditional healer, blacksmith and village chief. In most instances people were contacted through the village chief or head of the women’s committee. Although this was often time-consuming, once the interviews
were endorsed by respected members of the community, the respondents had greater confidence and were more willing to cooperate. We always took care to stress that there was no material advantage to be gained by participating in the interviews, beyond the intrinsic value of sharing knowledge and experience.

Our method of selection was not statistically random since our sample, averaging perhaps 12 men and 12 women in each community, was too small and the logistics too difficult. Some people were selected by the chief, others by village groups, and some were self-selected. On occasion, people were too busy to talk or were simply suspicious of the questions and unwilling to participate.

In refugee camps, and other situations where a well-established social structure was absent, selection methods were more haphazard. Where a community leader could be identified, the channel of communication was relatively easy. More often the camps, lacking ethnic and social homogeneity, had no elected representatives, obliging us to wander from house to house making our own introductions. Interviewees, however, seemed prepared to accept this rather intrusive approach.

**The interviews**
The majority of interviews were conducted with individuals, although there were also a small number of group interviews of up to 15 people. While our main interest was specialised material on the environment and work practices linked to personal histories and anecdotes from individuals, group interviews were useful as they provided a consensus account. Individuals in a group situation are often animated by the discussion to follow through certain lines of inquiry in greater detail. Also, in many Sahelian societies the group is the familiar and preferred forum for discussion, especially with strangers.

Most interviews were conducted in private homes or in the shade of a lone but convenient tree. In some instances the village chief would call people to the village square or to his house. We encountered several problems in interviewing in the open: the heat of the sun rapidly wilts the interviewer and respondent; strong winds interfere with the microphone, affecting the quality of the recording; and droves of curious, often disruptive, onlookers are attracted to the site. Wherever possible we sought shelter and quiet.

Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and two hours, although initial introductions, rapport-building, tea ceremonies and other hospitalities often extended the time. Two hours is about the maximum sensible period for such intense dialogue. The interviewer has to be constantly alert,
planning the next question, encouraging the respondent to talk and looking for interesting areas of knowledge and experience to examine in detail. Since the “fatigue factor” is high, no more than three thorough interviews were conducted in one day, with an obligatory break after five days of interviewing.

All interviews were recorded on cassette and interviewers were encouraged to take notes to supplement the recordings. A number of people found the note-taking difficult, complaining that it slowed down the dialogue, distracted them from the questions and meant that they lost valuable eye contact with the respondent. Despite this, we stressed the value of brief notes as a useful means of cross-checking, providing back-up for a bad or faulty recording, and for recording non-verbal expressions and descriptions.

Translation
Following the interviews, the interviewer translated and transcribed the tapes into French or English. Transcription is a tedious and time-consuming process and fraught with problems, to which there are no easy answers. An extension worker from Mali poignantly described the type of problem she faced translating the interviews from Bobo into French. Bobo, she explained, is rich with subtly worded proverbs which cannot easily be translated. She cited the following example: “If you want to stop the mouse, you must first get rid of the smell from the soumbala spice.”

Apparently the proverb refers to the value of a good upbringing. In the past children were brought up to be polite and obedient and therefore could be relied upon to behave well. Today children fail to receive proper instruction from their parents, and for this reason cannot be blamed for behaving badly, just as the mouse is not to blame for taking the soumbala spice when it smells so enticing. Given the complexity of the proverb, the extension worker finally opted for a gloss which omitted the proverb itself. Indeed, so much of Sahelian expression is laced with proverbs which are often exclusive to a particular group that only members of the group can fully understand the meanings and implications. The outsider is left bemused—for example: “Les termites sont loin de la lune.”

THE RESPONSE
An analysis of the material collected reveals that the project did not recover as much indigenous knowledge, in its specifics, as originally intended. For instance, recipes for medicines, meals and organic fertilisers, and accurate descriptions of plant uses, changing vegetation,
animal numbers and herd composition, are often mentioned only in vague terms. The fact that many rural populations have been made to feel that their traditional techniques for agriculture, veterinary and medical care, are in some way “backward” and unscientific was undoubtedly a constraint. They are aware that the educated élites, who come on sporadic visits, tend to promote the adoption of new technologies and encourage a more scientific approach to development and conservation. For this reason many are reluctant to divulge methods of animal treatment, land conservation practices, or herbal remedies, which may label them as ignorant or out of touch with the “modern” world.

Our questions about traditional veterinary practices in a camp for sedentarised pastoralists in eastern Chad met with blank faces, shoulder shrugs, and a denial of the existence of any such systems. It was only after the interviewers began to talk in positive terms about techniques they were acquainted with from other areas that the respondents were persuaded to share their own extensive knowledge.

No time for numbers
Then there is the problem of trying to search for common ground across the different modes of cultural expression. The desire for quantification and specificity that preoccupies research in the North is not an easy notion to convey to a Sahelian farmer. Efforts to find out the number of cattle in his herd will more often than not provoke raised eyebrows, derisive laughter and evasive responses. “God is generous, I have enough animals to fertilise my fields!” ... “We have to make do with whatever God gives us.” The question is comparable to asking a European or North American for their bank balance or an inventory of their assets. Similarly, the question “How many hours does it take you to grind your corn?” may be answered, “I begin when I return from collecting the water and finish when my husband returns from the field.”

Responses which involve reference to figures, dates, weights and times are often spoken in French or English. Because such numerical accuracy is not perceived as relevant, it is not usually contained in the local language. For this reason the accuracy of ages, dates of specific droughts and famines is questionable. Indeed, throughout the interviews phrases such as “in the past” are always preferred to something more precise such as “in 1919” or “in 1940”.

It is difficult to know how such constraints on the collection of indigenous knowledge can be effectively overcome. It may be that the problem lies not so much in the method of collection as in the setting of inappropriate targets. Is there simply too romantic a notion of indigenous
knowledge? Such knowledge, after all, is not static but evolves to suit a changing environment. It must be open to the acceptance of new equipment and technologies. Farmers and pastoralists will adapt to whatever method serves them best, be it traditional or modern, old or new; archaic practices are usually retained not from nostalgia but because they still serve some purpose. But, as the interviews make clear, some traditions are retained through inertia or prejudice. There are reactionaries in every culture, but in the Sahel today such conservatism can lead to a cruel lack of development—particularly for women, as evidenced by the widespread resistance to education for girls.

One obvious drawback in employing non-specialist local interviewers is their lack of academic training in the detailed environmental or agricultural field. They could run through the checklist of questions but did not have the specialist knowledge to follow up on detailed points of concern and interest. On one site, in Kordofan, western Sudan, we tried a different approach. The coordinator, herself an agriculturalist working in the region, was briefed by an authority on Sudanese ecology who had worked in the area 30 years earlier, producing the first published botanical and environmental surveys. The questions were more informed, and the ability to cross-check details of change against the written and remembered record led to the interviews being much more specific than at other sites.

However, although a tight interview conducted by a specialist can get closer to accurately recording traditional knowledge, it also moves further away from the respondent’s priorities and views. These may sometimes be incoherent or even factually wrong, but they have an integrity of their own. There is, then, a tension between the interview that seeks to focus on indigenous knowledge, and the interviewer who solicits opinion and impressions. For the former the “facts” are primary and the respondent is secondary—a cipher; for the latter it is the other way round.

Perceptions of change
Despite these reservations, the interviews as a whole, although “unscientific”, describe a wide range of environmental knowledge and traditional farming and pastoral systems. Farmers talk about tried and tested methods of improving soil fertility; pastoralists explain how they control animal reproduction, the pastures preferred by each of their animals and the ideal ratio of males to females. Healing methods and herbal remedies are mentioned in varying degrees of detail. There is a great deal of repetition (some of which has been edited out of this book) which we have taken as evidence of a consensus about environmental and
Alkhayna Wale Ibrahim, a pastoralist in Mali, commented on changes experienced by nomadic women like herself: “Our work has changed. Before women only looked after children and did housework, but now we gather produce that we can sell, trade in tea, and make cushions out of wool and leather to bring in some money.”

social change. Some of these “findings” are new, some confirm hunches and others restate the obvious.

Change is everywhere recorded—no one can be left in any doubt that Sahelians have a thorough understanding of their own predicament, and of the causes of desertification. Whereas 30 years ago farmers were able to grow sufficient crops for subsistence plus a surplus for sale, they are
now often cultivating from three to five times as much land in the uncertain hope of a yield that will provide enough for their subsistence. Many of the men are seeking employment in the towns so that their families, left behind in the villages, have enough to eat.

Plant breeders have succeeded in developing new varieties of sorghum and millet requiring a shorter growing season, which are able to take better advantage of the meagre rainfall when it occurs. But the extension services are still woefully inadequate and the costs of introducing new technologies often prohibitive.

Those who had led a nomadic life and lost their livestock through lack of pasture have been forced to settle and attempt to make ends meet by cultivation or by seeking employment in the towns. Many long to return to their nomadic way of life and attempt to rebuild their stocks, preferring sheep and goats (especially the latter), since they reproduce more rapidly and are better able to survive on the scanty pasture than cattle and camels.

The shift from pure pastoralism to agro-pastoralism and herding for wages (from absentee owners) is visible across the Sahel. When—and if—more “normal” rainfall returns, the pasture will be slow to recover, passing through various stages of rehabilitation before approaching the levels of former years. A prerequisite for any recovery, which is well understood, is for livestock numbers to be kept well below the actual carrying capacity of the existing pasture.

There is clear agreement among those interviewed about the main reason for environmental degradation: inadequate and sporadic rainfall. Man-made factors are also cited: pressure on land due to rising population and the fact that more and more pastoralists, whose herds have been decimated by the droughts, are turning from pastoralism to farming. Bush land is being cleared with increasing rapidity to make land available for cultivation. The increased pressure on land and natural resources has disrupted what was a “previously amicable relationship between farmers and pastoralists”: conflicts between the two are frequently reported.

Although the majority of the interviewees felt that degradation was attributable to climatic change, many were confident that steps can be, and are being, taken to counter the damage. Trees are being planted; the fertility of the soil has been improved by adaptations to traditional farming methods, such as compost holes and bunds to reduce soil erosion and improve infiltration of water.

**Patterns of life**

It was also our aim to record social and cultural change. In this, the Sahel Oral History Project exceeded its expectations and has established a fuller
picture of community history and social evolution than originally anticipated. It has revealed the extent of the breakdown of traditional relationships between groups: adults and children, sedentary farmers, pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, men and women.

Much of the information contradicts received development wisdom and provides ample evidence that many standard generalisations simply do not stand up, or are so general as to be seriously misleading. For instance, the interviews highlight the dangers of generalising about women’s position in rural communities. According to Fatchima Beine, president of the women’s committee of Abalak village, Niger: “Before, when natural resources were abundant, women did not have to work so hard. Now, however, women do the same work as the men and during the day they work in the field.” But in Tibiri, another village in the same district, local farmer Sayanna Hatta commented: “New technologies have helped to lighten a woman’s load, she no longer has to spend several hours a day grinding grain due to the presence of diesel-powered mills; there are wells and pumps from which she can collect water. The men plough the fields and if the family don’t have enough food then it is the men who have to go in search of supplements.”

As always, there are marked differences in circumstances within villages and between communities that are lost in generalisations. “Years ago all the wood we needed was near. It used to take us only five minutes to collect. Now it’s a 10-hour trip, so those who can afford it buy it from the men who sell it in the market.” (Rékia, woman farmer, Takiéta, Niger.)

As far as fuelwood collection is concerned, the gap between women with some money and women without has widened.

In the Nile province of Sudan, married women whose husbands have remained in the area as farmers welcome their improved quality of life: “Now we don’t have to pound the dura, or pull water from the deep well; also our participation in agricultural work has decreased.” (Um Gazaz el Awad, Shendi); “When I was young I used to do some work on my husband’s farm. But now women are just sitting at home waiting for the men to bring money to them.” (Hajeya Juma Ahmed.) But in the same area the widow of a pastoralist has had to work as a paid seasonal labourer and is the sole breadwinner for a family of eight.

**The value to projects**

Development projects are often caught up in an almost obsessive drive to produce quantifiable results which can be presented to donors as proof of the project’s success. In this quest for measurable achievements, other more subjective parameters are either forgotten or ignored. We believe
this study, in creating a dialogue between development workers and local communities, has demonstrated the value of improved communication at all levels of project activity.

Each development project associated with the interviews was at a different stage, so it was possible to assess the value of participation throughout the project cycle. In Niger we conducted interviews before the project started; the woman interviewer was subsequently employed by the project to manage the women's programme. In Mali the project was at an early stage, in Sudan about half-way through. It became clear that it is never too late to use oral history as a project evaluation tool, but it is most useful if implemented at the planning stage. In Niger, for example, the interviews were used in the project design and followed through thereafter, and extension workers now set up oral history interviews each time they enter a new village.

Feedback from project sites shows that interviewing work conducted by extension workers has had a number of spin-offs—it is an effective method for creating links with new communities, and also a valuable training tool. The coordinator of the interviewing work in Mali notes in her report that the work provided her with a new training area, from which both she and extension workers have benefited. She concludes: “The general utility of this research to the project is that it does something to counteract the idea that farmers are ignorant, conservative and fatalistic. Such preconceptions persist amongst our staff, although they are more subliminal than explicit. Little attempt is made to link the techniques we are trying to popularise with the farmers’ own experiments. Thus the extensionist appears as a giver of solutions and the farmers’ own capacities are undervalued. And, seeing themselves as surpassed, the farmers are less likely to volunteer suggestions, further aggravating the imbalance. The more details we have of farmers’ knowledge and ingenuity, the more we can hope to counteract these problems of attitude.”

In the same vein, a Senegalese non-governmental organisation (NGO), Fédération des Paysans Organisés du Département de Bakel, noted: “We wanted to participate in this project from the start because we realised that it would be of benefit to our own work....We felt that it would be particularly useful to our literacy trainers. In this respect the results have gone beyond our expectations. What might have seemed like a lot of extra work from the outside in fact worked to our advantage. We put our trust in young inexperienced workers and were delighted to discover that they were able to carry out the work well....In addition they discovered a rich well of knowledge. We have decided that we cannot leave it here; we will
continue the oral history work in our own project.”

Thus not the least of the benefits of employing oral history methods in a development context is the impact on project workers, nearly all of whom have acquired valuable new insights, often into their own communities. If oral history techniques are institutionalised in project work, they can increase understanding and sensitivity towards the participating community.

A two-way process

A major obligation of the oral historian is to “return the compliment”. When “outsiders” initiate a programme of research, there should be a commitment to seeking new ways of ensuring that the resulting material is of value to the people who provided it. The NGO Fédération des Paysans at Bakel, for instance, published the interviews in Soninke, the local language, for use both as a local resource and as a tool in their literacy programme (see p72).

Perhaps the most immediate and practical value of the Sahel Oral History Project has been in identifying the benefits to projects and project workers of taking the time to learn, through interviews, as much as possible from individual life histories and reflections. Secondly, when such work is collected together, important “under-researched” areas become apparent and can be followed up to ensure that objectives of the developers take into account the many variations in attitudes and priorities of the individuals who make up the community.

To end with a story from Mali: There was once a village so wealthy that the young people decided to make it a youth village of eternal joy, by killing all the old people. On the chosen day there was a single youth who had pity and hid his father so as not to have to kill him. In the new, joyful village of youth, all were strong and worked for themselves, and there were no old people to feed. One day the village was visited by a delegation from the local government, who suspected that something was wrong. They asked the young villagers if they could make a rope out of sand. Impossible. Wild attempts were made to gather up the soil, to no avail. The youth whose father was alive crept off to consult him. The father advised the boy to ask to see the old sand rope first. Thus the delegation realised that this boy’s father at least was still alive, and while the others were punished, he was spared.
Editorial Note

The material in *At the Desert’s Edge* has been selected from over 500 interviews conducted in 1989 and 1990, and represents perhaps 10% of the Sahel Oral History Project. (This is reflected by the “missing” numbers between interviews.) The editorial principle has been to select on the basis of narrative interest as well as representative views, and to tamper as little as possible. Some interviews have been condensed where they repeat a well-established point, although we have not touched contradictions, confusions or errors of fact. Because all the interviews have been transcribed from the original languages into English, or French and again into English, some misinterpretations and mistranscriptions have undoubtedly crept in. Ideally, we would have cross-checked the edited interviews with the interviewers and, indeed, the respondents themselves, but unfortunately we found this to be hugely impractical.

Within the text, plant names are italicised and there is a full Botanical Glossary on p233. Words in bold are defined in a separate Glossary on p227. It is a tribute to the richness of the languages spoken in the Sahel that it has not always proved possible to find a helpful English equivalent for certain words: for example, for different kinds of fishing net, some foods and livestock illnesses, or for the many species of fish and wild animals described. Such words are left unglossed. For convenience, the plural form of Arabic and local words has been denoted by simply adding an “s”.

All unedited interviews have been translated into English and are stored on disk, together with a full published index available from SOS Sahel, 1 Tolpuddle Street, London N1 OXT. A complete botanical index to all interviews is in preparation.

Sources for country profiles:

*Human Development Report*, UNDP 1991. The Human Development Index combines national income with two social indicators, adult literacy and life expectancy, to give a better measure of human progress than GNP alone, since economic growth is not always translated into improvements in people's lives.

*Country Reports*, Economist Intelligence Unit, 1990-91, Business International Limited.


The brief histories have been provided to give a framework to the interviewees’ recollections, and hence go back no further than the colonial period.
Country Profile: MAURITANIA

Human Development Index (UNDP): 148th out of 160 nations
Life expectancy at birth (1990): 47 years
Population per doctor (1984): 12,120
Adult literacy (1985): male 40%; female 16%
Labour force employed in agriculture (1985-1988): 69.4%
GDP from agriculture and livestock (1988): 38%
Principal exports: fish and fish products, iron ore, animals