At Ouahigouya, in the north of the country, interviews with settled farmers were conducted in Mooré by Camille Bernard Kabor, a researcher from the Institute of Human Sciences, Ouagadougou, and by Mariam Maiga, women’s officer with the organisation Six S (Se Servir de la Saison Sèche en Savane et au Sahel). At Gorom Gorom, in cooperation with the Union des Groupements Villageois d’Oudalan (UGVO), interviews were carried out with pastoralists and agro-pastoralists in Peulh and Tamashek by Abdoulaye Diallo, a researcher at the Institute of Human Sciences, and by Alimata, a local woman. The third site, Saponé, is the base for an integrated rural development project run by the Association Vive Le Paysan. Two extension workers from this project, Ilbouolo Yabré and Adèle Konseiga, conducted interviews with local farmers in Mooré. Work in Burkina Faso was coordinated by Rhiannon Barker and Rosalind David.

Kabré Gomtenga (F, 70 years), Saponé
Samné Goama (F, 140 years)
Roamba Tampoko (F, 40 years)

During our lives there have been many changes. It does not rain as much as it used to and the harvest from our fields is not as large. Farming has become much more intensive and people have claimed larger areas for cultivation. Now one person may have the area that five people would have farmed in the past. This has been made possible by the new labour-saving equipment, such as animal-drawn ploughs. Those who cannot afford this equipment can farm only about 30% of the area farmed by others. Grain has become much more expensive. When we were young you could buy a huge amount of grain for 50 CFA. Now the same amount costs 1,800-2,000 CFA.

We can’t use fertilisers since we have no means of transporting them to the field. The only way in which we try to improve the fertility of the soil is by each year changing the crop variety in a certain field. When the soil was more productive this was not necessary. We could plant millet for up to 10 years on one plot of land without the soil becoming tired.
A number of weeds persistently appear in our fields and can seriously reduce the yields. They include wôgo, yodga and tim-timtinga.

We have cut down all our trees and as a result the wind makes us suffer because it erodes the soil. We have been educated about this problem and now we build diguettes to try to reduce the damaging effects of erosion. We have plans to build shelter belts. Ravines can also damage our fields and to stop these enlarging we put stones in the path where the water flows.

We remember when, to find firewood, we only had to look behind our houses; today we have to walk up to 8 or 9 kilometres. The most important trees that we have in our area are the karité and the néré, while the most valued animals are goats and cows.

In the past we had various means of making extra money. We used to go to Ouagadougou where we would trade in a small way, buying and selling butter, kola nuts and wood. Now we ask our children to do this for us. Unfortunately, if the child has to walk—or even if he has a bicycle but simply does not want to go—he may refuse.

Nutrition
In the past men and women took joint responsibility in some areas. When one of our children was ill, the man and his wife would take some water in a gourd and carry the child over 20 or 30 kilometres to the home of the traditional healer. Now a mother can go on her own with the child to the dispensary; the journey does not usually take more than 30 minutes or an hour. On the whole, the health of our children has improved since there is now a much greater variety of food for them to eat. When we were young we only had tô, fritters and wild leaves to eat. Now we supplement this with vegetables, fruit, rice and couscous. Soumbala has always been an important supply of vitamins. The most common illnesses that we suffer from are measles, tuberculosis and worms.

The health agencies have taught us about hygiene and the conservation of water. We know that water must be kept covered and should be changed after two days. During the winter we collect our water from the pond, a kilometre away. When this dries up we have to walk 5 or 6 kilometres.

The way we work has become more collective. When I was young, it was rare for people to meet up except on festival days or when the chief asked for a collective effort to be made in somebody’s field. Today men and women help each other. We have a number of collective fields in our village where we work together for the development of our area. In this way we progress faster and exchange ideas. When our neighbour is in difficulty we are always ready to help.

We can see with our own eyes that the population in this village has
grown during our lifetime. In 1930 there were only about 20 families here. Since then this has more than doubled. We believe it is good to have large families so that there are plenty of children to help us in our work.

The number of animals owned has also greatly increased. In our day there were only two farmers who kept animals, whereas now there are more than 10. Our young people are shrewder than we were. They go to Côte d’Ivoire where they make enough money to buy more animals. Some peasants manage to earn enough money from selling rice to acquire livestock—only the richer ones who own a lot of land.

Movement around the countryside has been made much easier by motor cars. Before there were any vehicles we would walk up to 25 kilometres at a time before we took a rest. We would carry water for the journey in gourds on our heads. Today it only takes about one hour by car to get to Ouagadougou, whereas it used to take us over a day.

Before development schemes started in the area we were without a dispensary, a well, a main road or a school. Now a lot of improvements are being made and this should encourage people to come and settle here. Our life is good.

Changing relationships
In the old days, it was the elderly people who gave us our education. If you wanted advice, for example if you wanted to leave your husband, you would go to the old people in the village to ask for counsel.

If a woman was stubborn and did not obey her husband then he would punish her by giving her maize to crush or perhaps by beating her. Now the men no longer have such power over the women, who are freer than ever before to do what they want. Men and women still have a definite division of labour. Men build the houses and do most of the farming. They look for straw to make the grainstores. Women grind the millet, cook the food, collect the wood, help with the harvest and have children. Women also have a small plot of land to farm themselves. They play a supportive role in community work and administration. For example, we have helped our husbands get medicines to stock the dispensary.

Circumcision was once seen as an important event. There were lots of festivities and people played the tam tam in the bush. Today the operation is no longer treated with much ceremony. By contrast, marriages are more lavish affairs than they used to be. The bride used to receive a calabash, a plate and a traditional straw basket called a péla-wê. For the last 10 years or so people have had to spend much more money, as the bride is not satisfied unless she receives many dishes and many pagnes. Funerals are the same. In the past a bit of dolo and tô was enough but now you need a
whole bag of rice, lots of dolo and lots of tô.

We have no methods of contraception other than abstinence. Women try to wait three years between each child. If the woman has co-wives then this is easy enough. If she is the only wife and refuses to sleep with her husband, then there is a danger that he will take another lover.

**Fatimata Sawadogo (F, 62 years), Ouahigouya**

A frail woman, Fatimata was sitting on a woven mat in the middle of her courtyard, rolling out balls of kaado which she then laid in the sun to dry. Kaado is made from sorrel leaves and is used for flavouring food in the Yatenga region of Burkina Faso. Fatimata sells the kaado in the local market to earn a little extra income. Her courtyard was enclosed by the walls of neighbouring houses and even at this early hour the heat was bouncing off the red sandstone. We sat on a second rush mat, in front of her kitchen and in the shade of the millet granary.

I was born and brought up in the village of Songondin in the Zogou area, which is in Yatenga province. I received the same education that most Burkinabé farmers gave their children. At an early age I learnt to farm as well as to spin cotton, weave baskets and carry water on my head.

I earned my living from weaving baskets. At one time, I could make more than 30 a month. Now I only spin cotton. I have given up weaving—and farming—as I am quite often ill.

One of the things that most dominated my life was my marriage. I didn’t want to stay with my husband because he was too old for me. I often used to try to escape but my parents refused to let me leave my husband. I had four children with this man and when he died I was left alone to bring them up. They often used to go to sleep at night without any supper. Sometimes we would only be able to eat one meal a day. During the drought of about 10 years ago, we would sometimes resort to eating wild leaves, like eligo and keglu-vando. I never turned to stealing or lying—just struggled even harder to survive.

**Silent women**

Before, it was a silent life between men and women. They never spoke to one another, not even husband and wife. Neighbouring women would pass the evenings chatting and spinning, and you would talk with other women at the wells or at the grinding stone. Women never spoke in the presence of men: they’d be ashamed and above all scared that they’d be beaten by
their husbands on returning home. So women kept their ideas to themselves, even if these would have been a help to the community. Women are never allowed to inherit the land of their husband. As this is normal here, women never complain, thinking “that’s how things are”. Nowadays, the radio is a major source of information. This keeps women up to date with all the news from the area, the town, neighbouring countries and overseas.

We now have women who preside over meetings in the villages, in the local area and even in the towns. They have all been democratically elected by village groups and through other political structures. Development projects have helped women greatly in their work, through meetings and by helping them to visit different areas and exchange ideas about different social structures.

**Migration**
The Burkinabè people have always liked to stay in their area. They value the elderly people in their families and don’t want to leave them. However, sometimes lack of food forces people to leave. Generally, it is only the young people who are able to move. It’s too difficult with old relatives. In this area, women go along with their husbands if that’s what their husbands want. There’s no such thing here as single women migrating.

Whenever I had a child I didn’t mind whether it was a boy or a girl. The essential thing was that God might bless the child with a long life. I prefer a large family. If some children die, there are still some left to help you when you are old. To help ensure I have enough to survive on—both millet and money—I have worked hard to bring up my grandchildren. Sometimes my brothers, who live in Côte d’Ivoire, send me the odd present but it is a hard life for an old woman.

The dishes that we prepare are tô, couscous, haricot beans and leaves and sometimes rice. Only rich families can eat rice. I cook everything on a wood fire. Before, a family would eat only one main meal a day, in the afternoon. Anything left over we ate the next morning. Now almost all families prepare food twice a day.

The division of work between children is important after they reach 10 years of age. Then the young boys are put in the care of their fathers to learn about men’s work, while young girls stay close to their mothers to learn about the type of work that women do. In some ways the behaviour of children has changed. Old people are not satisfied with it; they think children now are impolite and don’t have enough respect for their parents.

There are four of us who cultivate the land for our family. We store the harvested millet in granaries and dry our groundnuts and peas. There
A Mossi village

are times of difficulty when you can’t work because you’re sick with malaria or some other disease and so the amount of work the family can do diminishes considerably.

Climate change
It used to rain a lot. From planting to harvest the soil would be moist. The trees were thick and full and the countryside was rich with wild animals. People were content because it was never hard to find food. Now the soil has dried up and people are unhappy and worried about the future. The degradation of our area has taken place since about 1970. It has been caused by lack of rain and by men cutting down the trees. The number of wild animals has decreased considerably. You can only find rabbits, porcupines and big rats these days.

It’s now begun to get hot and dry in March, April and May. It’s hot and humid from June to October and then dry and cold from November to February. The dry season has begun to dominate the year and the various seasons have become less obvious. Sometimes it is hot when it should be cold.

There used to be huge trees and abundant grass and everything was
green. Firewood was always near and easy to find. Now, when you leave Bobo Dioulasso in the south and travel north to Ouahigouya you can see how the vegetation has changed. We buy firewood in Ouahigouya because otherwise we’d have to walk about 15 kilometres to find any.

Soil erosion has made our land far less fertile. To protect the top-soil I use manure and the waste from my family. We spread manure three times each year. We try to leave the earth fallow for three or four years. We also rotate the type of crops grown. At the moment, in the Yatenga, agriculturalists are looking for seeds which grow quickly and mature before the end of the rains. It is possible to cultivate the same piece of land for 20 to 30 years, but to maintain the yield you must put on a lot of manure. You must also build diguettes to stop soil erosion.

**Traditional remedies**
Traditionally we have many uses for our plants. On the seventh day after the birth of a child we use various preparations to ensure that the child develops properly. We use wolzare, to guard against any hereditary diseases and banguedéré if the child cries a lot. To relieve congestion we give the child zaaga leaves boiled in water.

When I was younger and fitter I would make baskets out of fibres from tansalga, kango and peleiga trees and from the stem of a plant called kougaré. It is difficult to find these today.

Families use different types of wood as totems. We are not allowed to use pousga trees because they are used by bone-setters. We don’t cut the kango tree as it is sacred. Certain families used it during the tribal wars to make shelters and so managed to survive.

There are no plants which we use as contraceptives or for abortions. In the past poverty meant that women did not really enjoy sex. They were too tired and didn’t have enough to eat.

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**Haoua Ouédraogo (F, 62 years), Ouahigouya**

**Lizèta Porgo (F, 65 years)**

The interview took place in the courtyard of Haoua Ouédraogo’s house. Beside us was a water filter made from two canaris. The one on top was perforated and filled with layers of gravel, sand and carbon, which cleaned the water as it passed through. A piece of white material covered the top of the jar. Haoua was a frank straightforward woman, Lizèta was shy and quiet.
Haoua: Although I am quite old I still farm the land, just as my parents always did. My parents taught me how to fetch water, cook food and weave cotton. We used to have great respect for those who were older than us and knew more than we did. I have been the mother of nine children myself, though of these seven died so I am left with just two.

Lizèta: I am a farmer, as my parents were, although I also do a little trading in the market. Of the 12 children I bore only three are still living. The death of my boys was one of the worst things that has happened to me. If my boys were alive today they would be married and I would be benefiting from their wealth. I would suffer less than I do because my daughters-in-law would be there to look after me.

When I had my children I did not mind whether they were girls or boys. We like both sexes, although in my opinion boys are more difficult to educate and train. I am in favour of big families. There is a better atmosphere when there are more people, everyone exchanges ideas, and the children grow up in a stimulating environment.

Even if we had wanted to control the size of our families, we never had any form of traditional contraceptive. The only form of family planning we knew was personal restraint. To have a second child before the first child was three years old was a practice which brought shame to the family.

Changes for women

Haoua: Today, the position of women has improved. Before, we would only meet our neighbours at ceremonies such as marriages, baptisms and funerals. Now we work together on projects and have frequent meetings with other women in our groupement, in which we all discuss ways of overcoming our problems. Generally, I am most satisfied with the advice that I receive from these women. The only thing I regret is that women are no longer as warm and welcoming as they once were. In the past, if I had a problem I would go and see a wise old women from my area of town. She always gave me very good advice.

As for the division of labour within the family, it is the job of the women to spin and weave the cotton, fetch the water and grind the millet. The cotton cloth is then given to the boys in the family. If they are intelligent, they sell it so that they can build their future. As soon as the daughters are old enough they help their mother. Boys stay with their mother until the age of 10, when they begin to work with their father.

Modern women are much freer than we were. Twenty years ago a woman had to marry and care for a husband chosen for her by her father or brother. If she didn’t like the choice she just had to put up with a
miserable existence. Women today do not accept such subservience, and refuse to accept what they do not want. They are better provided for and better organised. For those who cannot read or write there is the opportunity to join a group run by the Union des Femmes du Burkina, which educates women and is a forum for debate and exchange of ideas.

I think that, on the whole, women are happy with the present political situation where there is one party. Before, Ouahigouya was full of so many different political groups that women’s voices were muffled by the rest and nobody listened to the demands that we were making. Now we are more easily heard.

In my youth the rain used to fall throughout the wet season, right up until September. The trees were dense and bushy and the weather humid. There has been a great amount of degradation because the rains have decreased. The soil is so dry that the trees have died.

Vegetation near our living quarters has become thinner, though you can still find thick green vegetation about 10 to 13 kilometres away, or nearer to home in our sacred areas where the trees are preserved for our traditional ceremonies. To find firewood we have to walk up to 10 kilometres, and those who are too old or infirm have to buy their wood in the market. We select different types of timber to serve different functions. For building we use *willimwiiga*, *kouiga* and *préferga*. Artisans carve their works of art from *koigo* and *tansalga*, whereas herbalists make medicines from *willimwiiga*, *kouiga*, *banguedéré*, *sourtoutougou* and *kiskinde*.

The lions, buffaloes and antelopes which 20 years ago used to roam through these parts are today nowhere to be seen. The only animals we see today are rabbits. Even the birds, such as the *nomwalga*, are now rare, because there are no big trees for them to perch on.

**Migration**

During bad agricultural seasons some of our people go to the south to farm. Some family heads search for land which they can move to permanently and send for their families. Some people move for social rather than economic reasons—for example, if they have had a serious dispute with a neighbour or a relative. As a rule, women do not move on their own. I must say that it is the people who stay, those who do not migrate, who have the most courage.

Most aspects of life today are easier if you have money. We used to get our water from ponds and from wells which we dug with our own hands, but these sources were liable to dry out. Today, those who have money can buy their water from a tap.

In this area we have benefited enormously from development projects
Animals are run by organisations such as Six S, Oxfam and CRDA. As a result, there is greater solidarity. We support each other and work together more than before. We have learnt a lot of new skills which have given us more confidence in our work.

Our field is big. Sixteen people work on it, including the two of us. Although we will not inherit any of the land when our husbands die, we work as hard as everyone else and, of course, we benefit from its produce. To improve the quality of the soil we spread natural fertiliser on it and, if we can afford it, chemical fertiliser too. If the soil is very poor we try to leave it fallow for three or four years to recuperate. Ideally, if you have two fields, you work one for three years and then switch to the other. Sometimes we practise mixed cropping since we find that the nutrients of one plant have a beneficial effect on another. The main crops are millet, groundnuts and haricot. Our staple food is millet so we never sell it except in exceptional circumstances. If we need extra money we sell groundnuts.

Traditional farming
We cultivate our fields by hand. In the past we used ploughs drawn by zebu but unfortunately they all died in the drought. A traditional farming practice called zai involves the digging of small holes, a few centimetres in depth, in preparation for the sowing of millet. Our ancestors found that the holes helped preserve the soil’s humidity during dry weather and therefore helped the millet resist drought.

After sowing, we have to weed and hoe the field. The worst weed is wanga, which attacks the millet stems. Our millet crop also suffers from the wind. We have no shelter belts around our fields and the strong winds can knock the plants over. When this happens we try to prop up the stem by building up the earth round it.

After each year’s harvest I save some of the grain in three large canaris. These I do not touch until the harvest of the following year approaches. If I need grain before this I prefer to buy it in the market. Of the three stores that I save, I give one as a present to my children. The second I sell and give the profit to community needs. The third provides the following year’s seed.

After harvesting we take up other activities while waiting for the rainy season to come again. Those of us who have irrigated land do vegetable gardening, while others spin and weave cotton to earn some extra money.

In our fields there are a number of ravines created by water running off the land. To prevent these spreading and ruining our farmland we fill the ditches with stones. We learnt about this from the development projects.

Of course, we like to keep livestock as well as to farm. Animals are a
good source of immediate credit during hardship. If you are struggling for food you can sell an animal without much delay. But this is only a temporary answer. Agriculture, if it is thriving, is much more long-term. More family members can profit from a good harvest. There is no doubt that our millet is very precious.

Food preferences have changed since I was young. Today the staple foods are tô, haricot beans, couscous (from the market) and the leaves of the haricot bean and kénébgo. In the past we used to eat a sauce made from the leaves of the baobab tree. It tasted so good, even without salt, that we ate it every day. Today, people don’t think that the sauce is good enough unless a Maggi stock cube, meat, salt and vegetables are added.

With more variety in our food, we no longer see cases of malnutrition. Besides, people are more educated and know which foods to eat to avoid certain complaints associated with vitamin deficiencies.

Children have been influenced by modern values which seem to have made them disrespectful of their elders. When we were young we listened to what our parents had to say, whereas the young today refuse all our counsel. For this reason parents are not happy with their offspring. When we were small we had to work to find clothes to wear and food to eat. Perhaps children now are too spoilt.

In the old days funerals were occasions which brought people together, since neighbours would give help and support to each other. Today it seems that if you want a good funeral you must spend lots of money, since people will only stay in the house of the deceased long enough to arrange the funeral dances if there is food to eat.

Our marriages were simple and straightforward affairs based on good faith. Today, if the marriage is to be acceptable to the young wife a fortune must be spent on sheep, kola nuts and clothes. Baptisms are just the same. The sad fact is that today everything is based on money. If you give a gift to someone today, you expect to receive something of similar value in exchange. For example, if a woman brings you a piece of soap worth 150 CFA she will expect at least 100 CFA in exchange.

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**B6 Group of women, Ouahigouya**

It is hard to say what types of soil we prefer because the most important factor determining the land’s productivity is the rain. Those of us who have the opportunity to cultivate different areas do so. Some farm on the bottom of a valley where the land is wetter and they also cultivate an area with hard soils, and then another with sandy soils. In this way, they don’t lose everything—whatever way the rainfall fluctuates.
Aminata Traoré (F, 50 years), Ouahigouya

Aminata Traoré is a local government officer. She does a great deal of work with women and also has her own irrigated market garden. Her work is her passion and she talked about it with great enthusiasm.

By birth I am a Malian. I was born and brought up in Bamako and came to Burkina Faso after my marriage. I am a civil servant, although in my spare time I do as much work as I can in my vegetable garden. My father was originally a farmer although later he took up commerce.

I went to primary school for six years and then to secondary school for four years. After this I got a post as a teacher but didn’t get on well in this profession so I opted for general administrative work.

My work is concerned with women, their position in politics and the more practical aspects of their lives, both in rural and in urban areas. We want women to progress, so it is important that we see to it their lives are happy. In the past all the heavy work was given to the women but they were given nothing in return. It was the man who dominated, who took the decisions, looked after the money and got to know the children. Women had practically no rights.

The Union des Femmes du Burkina, in cooperation with the government, has organised special activities for International Women’s Day. This helps to raise awareness about important issues. Since 1980 the Union has also provided women with training, for example, in small-scale trade and commerce, to help give them more financial independence. Our government now gives us so much consideration that women are asked to participate in international conferences, where they discuss issues such as desertification and the education of children.

Changes for women
Women are delighted with the work that is being done for them. We have more freedom and can travel from village to village in a way that was once unthinkable. We’ve been aided not only by changing public opinion but also by new equipment, such as grinding mills, which have lightened our workload enormously. Animal-drawn ploughs have meant that much bigger areas of land can be cultivated, so our harvests have increased. And then there are the carts, which mean we no longer have to carry everything on our heads and can transport large quantities of wood and water at the same time. Of course the only problem is that this equipment is not handed out free although, if women are lucky, it may be loaned to them by NGOs who offer training in its use.
It is important to warn children, particularly girls, that they may face various economic difficulties. Women have become more assertive and participate in a wide range of activities. They may, for example, buy vegetables from people who run the gardens and re-sell them at the market for a slightly higher price. So they gradually begin to save money and improve the life of their families. Another popular activity is to buy and raise chicks which they sell for a profit.

Children are a gift from God, so I do not believe that we should have a preference between girls and boys. I gave birth to nine children but only five of them are still living. I am left with four boys and one girl.

I spend a lot of my time working with rural women, showing them how to build stoves which are economical in their wood consumption. At the same time I raise their consciousness about desertification and the importance of conserving wood. I work under the auspices of the development project, Groupements Naam. Women are the true vehicles of development. It’s nonsense to talk about development unless you are working through women.

**Market gardening**

I also work in the market garden in a team of women. I don’t have any money of my own, which is why I see the importance of giving women who haven’t been to school the opportunity to earn money of their own in the market garden. Prices in the market are competitive because there is a great variety of produce. I do not garden solely to earn money, but also to encourage other women and because I enjoy it. Market gardening has many positive side effects. For example, we give old cabbage leaves to our animals to eat. Younger leaves are dried and saved for when there are no other vegetables around. In this way we avoid malnutrition.

Market gardening and the introduction of imported foods are changing our eating habits. Our two most popular dishes are t6, accompanied by sauce made from gombo, baobab leaves or sorrel, and rice with a groundnut sauce. Our vegetable gardens have introduced lettuce, potato and cabbage into our diet. Today, most people can eat until their hunger is satisfied.

Our plot occupies an area of half a hectare. It does not belong to us directly but is partly family property and partly lent by friends or neighbours. The best soil for market gardening is one which is neither too sandy nor too clayey; our soil isn’t ideal but it seems to adapt quite well. To improve its quality we lay down organic and chemical fertilisers. I prefer using animal dung to chemical fertilisers. If you want to be successful as a market gardener it’s important to keep animals. Many
women look after a few sheep which provide dung for the vegetables. I don’t think it’s advisable to use human excrement on the fields.

We have found that proper irrigation channels have proved more economical than spray and sprinkler systems. When the plot has lost its fertility we leave it fallow. I have already left one of my plots fallow for a year. In a week’s time I’m going to apply green fertiliser to this plot to try to restore its fertility. We also practise crop rotation to help maintain the soil’s quality.

We keep some vegetables for our own consumption, give some away to friends and the rest we sell in the market to raise the money to buy new seeds. Most of the vegetables are either sold by the kilo or by the calabash.

Most of the vegetables that we plant are new to the area. The most popular varieties include Chinese cabbage, caca cross cabbage, potatoes, carrots and aubergines. Like everything else, young seeds have a tendency to be swept away by the wind, so it’s essential to create some kind of windbreak. We do this by planting rows of maize around our vegetable patches. Some people also plant lemon tree hedges to mark their enclosure and to protect young plants from the weather.

During the rainy season I grow groundnuts. When I go to the field, the boys come with me to help while the girls stay at home to prepare the meal. We work until two in the afternoon and then we return home. In my house, boys and girls help cook the food. I think others should follow this example, since boys should be able to look after themselves.

The environment

Today there is no bush left, so there are no wild animals either. It’s at least 30 years since we saw any animals here. Now the only place you can find them in Burkina is in the game reserves in Comoé. In the past, when the rains were regular and trees plentiful, numerous birds used to perch in the trees. There was enough to eat, the harvests were good and our feasts were generous. Twenty-five years ago it would never have occurred to people to leave their families!

The vegetation today is only thick after the rainy season in the winter; during the dry season the land is bare. Local people have been forced to move away from this poor region, in search of richer areas where they can find food and money. As a rule it is only the men who migrate. Burkinabè women do not move around much on their own—it’s only the Dogon women we see coming on their own from Mali. They stay here for a short while and then return to their country. Many NGOs are currently fighting against the high levels of migration. The government supplies extension workers, like myself, who try to help the villagers find solutions to the
problems they face. Thanks to the work of these people, some of the young are beginning to realise that it’s not worth the effort of leaving for foreign lands, since if you make an effort there is money to be made here.

A few of our trees have been preserved because they are believed to be sacred or are particularly valued. The baobab, for example, is greatly

Women, laden with goods for market, pause in the shade of a baobab.
respected, as is the fromager under which the village elders sit to discuss their problems. There are certain small trees which only the chef de terre has access to. Each is linked with a specific state of affairs or event, such as the health of the village, a good harvest, or protection from the spirits. Similarly, certain animals are associated with various human qualities. If you were to call somebody a lion, for example, it would mean they had a lot of courage, whereas the rabbit is associated with intelligence and shrewdness.

Even though some traditions may be dying out, our people still place a lot of trust in old practices. I know that many of my colleagues who work for the state occasionally leave the town and consult their parents in the village about how they can use traditional practices to improve their work.

Although our climate has been changing since 1970, we can still identify certain seasons. The hottest part of the year falls between March and June. The rains begin in July and last through to October. They bring with them a lot of ill health caused by mosquitoes. The coldest part of the year is from November to January, when illnesses are on the decline. Nowadays, because of desertification, the heat is more persistent and the winds carry large amounts of sand.

Everyone has equal access to the available water, regardless of their tribe. In some areas, where serious degradation and desertification have lowered the ground-water level, water is scarce and women have to travel long distances searching for supplies. In the past, the wells rarely dried up and women did not have to go so far.

In the town, more and more women get their water from the tap. We have a tap in our house which supplies all the members of my family, as well as neighbours who ask to use it. We have to pay for this water.

**Urbanisation**

The town of Ouahigouya is rapidly expanding. There are a number of reasons, in particular the new technologies and improved infrastructure which encourage people to settle here. The opportunity to acquire land which can be irrigated is a great attraction, as is the presence of development groups who can teach us methods of improving soil quality and tackling erosion.

As urbanisation has increased and our lives have become more sedentary, we have seen changes in family size. People used to think it a great asset to have a large family since children were viewed in terms of available labour. Today, with all the climatic factors affecting us, people have begun to realise that having fewer children makes better economic sense. The smaller the family, the better the education and training that
can be given to each one. Men, anyway, seem to prefer small families. In urban areas women feel the same, though in rural areas some women still need persuading.

These days contraceptives are available from the SMI clinics (Santé Maternelle, Infantile). In the past, we tried to space the births of our children by practising restraint. Mothers know that spacing their children helps to protect them from illness, weight loss and even death. I would like to be able to have lots more children, particularly some little sons. The priorities in my life are to eat well, to clothe myself and to help my children and husband.

As far as development goes, I believe that the most important thing is for us women to participate in building up our infrastructure. We must replant the forest, protect our animals and try to avoid forest fires. We must plan our food resources for the future and avoid aimless wanderings.

**Harouna Ouédraogo (M, 92 years), Ouaghouya**

I was born and brought up in the Bingkiengo area. I didn’t go to school and at a young age I took up a small job at the local primary school. In 1914, when I was 17, I found myself in paid employment. I met my wife and we eloped together to Ouagadougou, where we married without the permission of our parents. We stayed there for nine years, then our families pardoned us. I was able to return to my own family and stay in the village next to that of my wife’s family. With this wife I had just one son, who is now dead. When he died he left me responsible for his widow and their 11 children.

In 1914 there was a terrible famine which killed many people. I swear that at that time people walked to Bobo Dioulasso, seizing food along the route and risking their lives to try to provide for their dependents. Some years later there was another serious famine which to this day is referred to as Naba Koabga famine, after the chief who ruled at that time. After this, about seven years ago, there was another famine, but it was eased by les blancs, who provided us with enough supplies to survive. Or at least, those with money escaped death, though I cannot say the same for those with none.

We have seen many changes in recent years. The winds have grown very strong because of all the wide open spaces. There are no trees or tall grasses to block its passage. The disappearance of the vegetation has also produced hotter weather and relentless sunshine. There are no wild
animals any more. If you want to see a yâka, walga, gnissini or an ostrich you now have to travel at least 40 kilometres. When I was young you could go 7 kilometres and you would see a lion. The main factors that have led to this are the increase in population and the lack of rain. With the growth in population the few trees which have survived the capricious rains are also being cut down. If you can imagine, it is like making someone who is already sick carry a heavy weight on his back. You can be sure that he will fall.

**Uses of trees**

Look at my roof! The big beams are made from a tree called a siiga and the rest of the wood, crossing the beams, comes from the pimpirssi. Neither of these trees can be found here any more. You need a vehicle to collect them because they are so far away. The same is true for soug’ dri, barkoudi, koanga and others too numerous to mention. However, some plants have proved resilient to the harsh conditions and these have been grown more intensively. Trees and plants that can still be found in this area today include taanga, taya and pougsa and others for which we have special uses. Kandiga (or zambnè) is used for dental problems. The roots of the sabcé plant are soaked in water and the solution is used in the treatment of abscesses. Pousse m’pougou is mixed with butter oil from the karité and the mixture is effective in the treatment of wounds. Waidéga is combined with sesame to cure a wide range of illnesses.

I could go on, since in fact most plants, shrubs and trees have a number of uses. However, there are two trees which are never cut or used for firewood. One is the widég ‘zaka, said to cause “the indiscriminate death of the heart” [heart attack] in anyone who cuts it. The other is kongo, which has the same name as our chief—because of this we have taken an oath never to cut it. During the major famines, we always gathered various wild plants to supplement our diet. These included wan’dé, pougsa and pénkidiga, which grew in the lowlands, and silikooré, a thorny tree bearing edible fruits. We also use the food supply of termites, a millet and grass mixture. However, the new generation no longer eats these things because provisions can be more easily procured by vehicle. As long as you have money you should be able to find food. Unfortunately, for those without money, the plants I have mentioned can no longer be found in the area.

The pougsa is an essential tree and brings us great profit. The taya and kouka are also important. As for animals, the cow, donkey, sheep and horse are all important. Horses are no longer raised just for prestige, since people have discovered their value in agriculture. Only the chief of the Yatenga still uses his horse for riding. The first time I witnessed the use
of horses in agriculture with my own eyes was around 36 years ago.

**Pastoralism**

Drought has severely affected the pastoralists’ way of life. In the past when the rains were good and there was plenty for the animals to eat, cows were easily acquired and raised. Today the Peulh have lost most of their animals. They have to drink milk and yoghurt made from powder bought in a tin. There is simply no longer enough grass for the animals to eat; you even see them eating earth.

During the last famine, cows which once fetched 30,000-35,000 CFA were sold at 500 CFA. After the animals were slaughtered the carcasses exuded a smell which the consumers found unpleasant. The few people who still practise pastoralism today tend to move their herds for part of the year to areas such as Garcy. This has two main advantages. First, the animals gain from the good supply of food and water. Second, the pastoralists themselves benefit because they can leave a reserve food stock in their village and maintain themselves frugally in the area of pasture, until they return home at the approach of the rainy season. In this way they fatten the animals while guaranteeing that a supply of millet remains at home.

I’ve already spoken of all the animals that have left the region. The same is true of the human population. When there is famine, people are forced to travel to the interior of the country, towards Bobo Dioulasso, in their search for food. Others leave for neighbouring countries—Mali, Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire—looking for paid employment. In both cases it’s not the women who take the initiative but the men. Only the single men are able to leave whenever they like, without informing or getting authorisation from anyone. In rare cases a woman may decide to elope with a man, or perhaps to run away to escape from a forced marriage. In normal circumstances a woman cannot go anywhere without permission from her parents or her husband.

I feel that since it’s the lack of rain which has caused the young to leave this region, it’s necessary to control the water so that there is a supply even when there is no rain. We have begun to work on such projects and if all goes well I think people will prefer to stay here than move to Abidjan.

**Land inheritance**

The system of land inheritance has changed over the years. In the old days, when there was lots of space, the ownership of land was based on the order of people’s arrival in an area. The first person to arrive on a piece of land was entitled to call it his own. After that it could only be taken by force...
or during tribal warfare. When *les blancs* arrived they brought a new system of administration and the method by which land was acquired changed. Under the new system the person who farmed the land was entitled, after a certain amount of time, to claim the land as his own. So landlords largely lost their power since you couldn’t own land that you didn’t farm yourself. Concerning inheritance, land is passed from brother to brother. If, for example, I die then my younger brother will inherit the land and be responsible for providing for my wives and children.

Although my wife helps me in the fields her real domain is the home. However, the husband grants his wife a piece of ground which she cultivates with her own hands, planting whatever she chooses. In addition to her own harvest, a woman is given a small amount of millet by her husband, which she can sell to buy the things necessary for her work in the home, like pots for cooking or sheets for the beds.

Today, to meet our many needs, both men and women are turning to alternative money-making activities. Men may go to other areas to buy goods—such as cloth, batteries, cigarettes and cooking utensils—which they then sell in local markets. Women are more likely to practise small trading, selling tomatoes and peppers.

Men and women have their own clearly defined economic duties. Women take care of small domestic needs, while men are only concerned with the purchase of larger items. This is because women are not able to buy in bulk. In the first place they can’t travel as easily as men, who can go to Abidjan [Côte d’Ivoire] or Bamako [Mali] and buy goods to bring home. Second, it’s the men who possess sufficient capital to guard against the occasional misfortune when they are robbed by bandits or cheated. Women are not in a position to cope with this.

These days when you are a farmer growing crops it is very hard to look after animals. In the past, it was easy to maintain a herd of around 30 goats and sheep and to use their excrement in the fields. Now such a practice is out of the question. Even with only 10 animals I can’t control their movements and am forced to keep them in an animal pen and pay someone to take them away to find pasture. The expense of their maintenance exceeds their real value. Pastoralists don’t suffer this problem. It’s only those of us who live in permanent settlements. For those people without children it is harder still, since they have no one to guard their animals.

Still, it is possible to make a profit from cattle. I had a small herd and sold some of the small animals to buy a calf which I kept until it had grown, when I sold it for 75,000 CFA. You have to agree that this was a good profit. Unfortunately the other animals were slaughtered two years ago,
so that we could provide people with food at the funeral of my younger brother. I no longer have any cattle—they have all died. Even if I were to get more, since I have no children there would be no one to look after them. My two grandchildren who remain at home both go to school.

**State support**

The government has provided for our community in a number of ways. During the last famine they supplied basic provisions to keep us alive. About 12 years ago they built a number of small dams. The water system allows us to irrigate our vegetable gardens and grow lettuces, cabbages, tomatoes, onions carrots, radishes and turnips. With our improved infrastructure we are now better prepared for future famines. Today, it is only the lazy who should suffer from famine.

We are now able to get water from the tap, at a cost of 100 CFA a barrel. This has led to a marked improvement in our lives.

To try to counter the declining fertility of the soil we apply natural fertiliser. The fertiliser of *les blancs* [chemical fertiliser] is used only on humid ground because otherwise it tends to burn the seeds. Our predominant soil type here is laterite.

The increasing population size is a response to the wishes of God. At the time of our fathers you could not have as many as six wives unless you were a chief. The maximum for an ordinary man was two or three wives. Only very rich men or chiefs could afford to have more. Now, men

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**B23 Hamad Ahmed (M, 26 years), Gorom Gorom**

I earn my living as a shepherd. Most people in the village do not have any animals left, since most died during the drought. It is not really worth their while going in search of pasture with just one cow, so they give it to me to look after. In all I have a herd of about 40 cows, all belonging to the villagers. They give me 50 CFA a week for looking after their animals, or they may pay me in kind with a bowl of millet.

I take the cows to the bush nearby, never going farther than about 12 kilometres. In the evening, I return the cows to their owners and they are given dried grass or grain husks to eat. They graze on cram cram or fonio. I know other shepherds who go much farther with their animals. Sackau, about 55 kilometres away, is a popular area to take cattle. Most of the shepherds stay there for anything between a few weeks and a few months, returning in the rainy season when they can find pasture nearer home. During drought years, when the normal water points have dried up, we dig the ground until water appears, so that our animals do not die of thirst.

I have to give some of the money that I earn to my mother and brother. My father is dead and, as the eldest son, it is my responsibility to support them. It is hard, since I have a wife and one son of my own to support. I can't see how I'll ever be able to save enough to buy a cow of my own.
are able to take several wives because there are more women than men.

Another reason for the rising population is the fact that some young girls today are burdened with unwanted pregnancies. I have known girls give birth in their father’s backyard as many as five times. Neither boys nor girls seem to want to get married. The boys only want to play with the girls and the girls just encourage them, since they too want to lead the good life and to eat good food such as grilled meat. People today live without faith or laws. Before, all young people were married and they lived according to various rules and regulations.

Children’s behaviour
Two different types of children can be found today: those who love and respect their parents, and those who have broken all links with their home. If I send a child on an errand he may refuse to do what I ask him. Even if he deigns to carry out the job, I cannot be confident that it will be done well. In my childhood, such behaviour was impossible. If I try to punish my children, by refusing them a meal, I know that they will find other means, even if they have to steal in order to eat. Formerly, my sanctions would have been respected by everyone in the village and the child would not have won his case. Children are no longer submissive. This change in attitude has taken place gradually over the last 50 years.

When I think about what has changed, the things that strike me most are the new types of food, the fact that everyone wears clothes, and the new materials used for construction: cement and corrugated iron. I am also struck by the fact that although we no longer suffer from certain illnesses, such as scabies, new illnesses have appeared. These include zaa and sudden fits.

It is true that conditions today are better than they were in the past, and this must continue. My priorities in life are never to go to bed without food, never to walk naked, to live honestly and proudly and, finally, never to steal or borrow.

B17  **Salam Sawadogo (M, 53 years), Ouahigouya**  
**Idrissa Sawadogo (M, 74 years)**  
**Boureima Sawadogo (M, 65 years)**  
**Hamado Sawadogo (M, 57 years)**

The interview took place in Gourga, a large village of some 1,800 people, 5 km east of Ouahigouya. The group sat on a bank of earth, under the shade of a neem tree. On the other side of the bank was the
entrance to the village's nutrition centre, outside which groups of mothers holding their babies talked together. The fields surrounding the village were full of millet and sorghum.

Our parents were involved in a number of different occupations including agriculture, pastoralism, weaving, dyeing of clothes and leather, and making guienda—the instruments which the women use to spin cotton.

Today the craft of dyeing has completely disappeared, despite the fact that women used to earn a lot of money from it. The first stage of the process was to dig a hole in the ground between 3 and 4 metres deep. Then they would make a rough cast from clay mixed with the hairs of sheep and goats, which they filled with potash water, itself obtained from cutting and burning very old trees. The trees were chosen specifically for their potash content, the most popular being siiga, although taanga, pousga and nobcé were also used. The women then added a mixture of ingredients to the water, including ground and dried gargà leaves. The mixture of the plant and the potash solution produced the dye, which was stirred over a fire for anything up to a week to produce the desired depth of colour.

Dyeing and weaving were the most important economic activities in this village when I was young. The art of dyeing has become obsolete because there are quicker modern methods and in the market we can buy clothes made by les blancs which are already bright and colourful. Young people no longer have any interest in learning traditional dyeing techniques as they are quite complicated. The same applies to the art of weaving which now exists only as a symbolic activity. Market gardening has replaced these crafts as the main economic activity.

**Famines worthy of names**

Many of the significant events in our life have been marked by famine. The famine of Naba Koabga was one of the most important. If I try to give you a date for this famine, all I can tell you is that there was a man in this village who died very recently at the age of 103 and that during the famine of Naba Koabga this old man was already fully grown. To be more precise, 30 years after the famine of Naba Koabga was the famine of Piiss’Wai [literally “90”], which was exactly 51 years ago. Between these two great famines was the famine of Suya, which means “grasshoppers”. For three consecutive years we were plagued by grasshoppers, after which our defences were so weakened that we were hit by famine.

There were other famines which were pretty well as bad but we did not give them individual names because by then the hardship had been alleviated by modern transport and other kinds of aid. During the previous
famines which were worthy of names, we were so desperate that we used to search the bush for wild leaves and plants to eat. Some of us went for 10 to 15 days without one grain of cereal passing our lips. In order to survive we ate the seeds from wild grasses such as lélogo, kièguèndo and titiko. During the dry season we ate silyingué and wan’dé, whereas during the rains the leaves of kamsaongo and poumpoumssé were popular.

None of us have had the benefit of education—we can neither read nor write. Despite this we manage to earn our living. In addition to our income from agriculture and herding, we do some small-scale trading and some of us get salaried contracts in town. After the harvest, some men are able to find work in the restaurants or with the gangs who work on the roads. Others earn a good extra income from market gardening.

God is responsible for what has happened to our environment. We could say that it was the lack of rainfall, but you should remember that the rain is given to us by God, so this is the primary cause. But there are other factors, such as the rising population and the increasing pressure we are putting on our environment. We can convince ourselves that as individuals we hardly make an impact on our environment. But if you stop for a moment and count up the number of individuals who are each thinking the same thing, each cutting down the trees, one at a time, you soon get a true measure of the scale of destruction. To see how much damage has been done you only have to look at the wildlife. If it weren’t for the hares, there wouldn’t be one wild animal left in these parts.

Many of our animals are of great traditional importance. Among domestic animals there are the goats, which are perhaps most numerous. They are ideal for those who are learning how to herd and for poor people who cannot afford any of the larger animals. Sheep are also important smaller livestock. They provide a valuable credit system since they can be sold to meet the immediate financial needs created by funerals or marriages. Urgent needs for smaller amounts of money may be met by selling poultry—our smallest asset. To afford large herds of the bigger animals you need cash. Again the advantage is that in times of hardship these animals can be sold.

**Environmental change**

The climate has changed. It began with a lack of rainfall and now all around us is open space. The winds and the hot air all blow in our direction. There is nothing to block their path. It is the same when the cold weather comes; it seems to be more bitter than it was before. But at least we have blankets nowadays to protect us. When I was young we were lucky if we had one piece of clothing to put round us. People who had clothes were
usually generous with them so if someone had to go on a journey, or to a funeral or festival, they would ask their neighbour to lend them something to wear. Today we are all better off. If five people were to approach me, all completely naked, I could dress them from head to foot without running short of garments.

Our vegetation has quite simply disappeared! To find wood for construction, of good enough quality, we have to go and buy it in the town of Ouahigouya. We generally manage to find firewood 5 or 6 kilometres from our houses. There are some trees which to a certain extent we have managed to protect, in particular those which are valued in traditional medicine. If we see an important tree being abused we do not hesitate to reprimand the vandal.

**Soil erosion**
To replace the trees that have disappeared we have begun to plant a number of different varieties which are not indigenous to the area, including neem, eucalyptus, lemon trees, mangoes and acacias. We have chosen two other sites around the village where we plant local species such as nobcé, sabcé, waidéga, gawo, baobab, néré and cailcédrat.

Our soils are in a bad state of repair, so we have begun the fight to save

"The winds and the hot air all blow in our direction. There is nothing to block their path."

Jeremy Huntley/Oxfam
them. We have constructed **diguettes** from stones, which slow down the flow of water as it runs off the land and allow the soil to absorb it rather than being eroded. We also use natural fertiliser and we have a new method for planting. Before we sow our seeds we dig holes in which we put layers of decaying vegetation and natural fertiliser. The holes are bigger and deeper than before and remain humid longer. With these new methods of maintaining fertility we no longer have to leave fields fallow.

Ever since my marriage, 25 years ago, I have gone on working the same plot of ground without it showing any signs of fatigue. At the beginning of each planting season it is like a brand-new soil. This is the advantage of using natural fertiliser. In contrast, chemical fertiliser dries out and eventually kills the soil. It is best used on humid soil, which we have not known since the rains began to decrease.

We have even been able to recover some of the land spoilt by ravines. As well as building **diguettes**, we make use of the soil’s humidity by planting vegetables—sorrel and *gombo*—on both sides of the ravines. Sometimes we also plant lines of trees along the **diguettes**, which act as hedges and stop the ravines spreading further.

We have a good domestic water supply. There are five wells, two of which we dug ourselves and three with pumps built by the government. Access to water is free, although when the pumps break down, we have to find the money from within the community to repair them.

**Changes in the community**

When we first arrived in this village there were 40 couples living here, whereas today there are 300. Because of this we are facing a shortage of land, and each of us has to stick to his original plot. I suppose population numbers have risen because of our wish to have large families. As long as our health allows, I think that we would have a hundred children if we could.

People who migrate can be divided into two categories. There are the money hunters who go to Ghana or Côte d’Ivoire, hoping to earn large sums of money. The other sort are those who leave their villages to go elsewhere in Burkina Faso as they are unable to survive on the meagre harvest from their infertile soil. The density of population has led many of our younger people to migrate. It is only those who have a deep love for the land which they farm who are prepared to stay.

Children have grown complacent because they want for nothing. Look at that child sitting in the yard over there. Just see how he is dressed! When we were young, until we were circumcised we didn’t have so much as a pair of underpants, or a blanket to cover ourselves with at night.
Today, even babies are dressed from head to foot. The result of this is that when a child grows up he does not behave as we would like. He may believe that he is the son of the chief, because he was never forced to face any difficulties. If we were to show our children the leaves we used to eat they would think we were mad. They have no understanding of why we used to eat such things. They don’t know what solidarity means. They even refuse to help us, their own parents.

In my day if you refused to help your father in his work you worried about where your next meal would come from. Today, somehow or other, children can survive for a whole year without eating in their father’s house. They organise themselves on the basis of self-interest. If one of them wants what the other has, they cannot seem to sort it out between themselves. The most ruthless one wins. Age no longer has anything to do with it.

*If we were to show our children the leaves we used to eat they would think we were mad*

*Djeylalli Hamad Daouda (M), Gorom Gorom*

The Peulh people, who are pastoralists, were happy when the rain came, since they worship it as if it were a god. They would hurry to communicate the good news to their animals. The animals had a perfect understanding of their language. Each animal had its own name, according to the markings or colour of its coat. When the Peulh called to them the animals would reply by bellowing in unison. They seemed to get on so well together that it made you wonder whether it was the cow or the pastoralist that was born of the other. There is a popular saying that the cow and the pastoralist have the same ancestor.

Women are largely dependent on men, who go in search of clothes and jewels. But with the move towards emancipation of women this is changing. Men and women work side by side. Women are involved in every type of activity and occupy posts of responsibility. Personally I don’t like this state of affairs. Women are now so free that they have begun to dress like Europeans, with tight skirts and trousers, hardly hiding their nudity. It’s shameful.

As for the children, they are the carbon copies of their mothers. They don’t do anything to make themselves useful today. They have no respect for the old. Even your own son will refuse to run errands for you on the basis that all work merits a salary. If you chase him out of the house he will simply go and find another father and mother, who will look after him and put up with his every whim. Deserted, we are left to fight our hunger. That’s what people refer to as civilisation!
I was born and grew up in Ménégou where my parents were courageous peasants. They raised a small number of goats and sheep but did not own any cows like true Peulh pastoralists. For the Peulh, the cow is an inexhaustible source of pride and happiness. My parents’ fields stretched out so far you could not see the end of them. The seasons were good and the harvest abundant. The environment was benevolent and everyone knew they could savour the fruits of a few months’ work in the fields.

When I was eight I went to school along with all the other children in the village. I had six years’ schooling and then returned to help my parents in the fields and the vegetable garden. My father used to gather in a huge millet harvest. He had three granaries: each year he would fill them all.

My father decided to marry me to a beautiful young neighbour. I liked her well enough despite her shyness. My sisters and cousins made all the preparations for the wedding. There were plates of sweet and succulent food, from recipes known only to my village. There was traditional dancing to the music of flute and the tam tam. We were as happy as we have ever been or ever will be again.

As the years went by, our luck began to turn. The rains became rare and inconsistent, the ponds dried up, and the trees died. Suddenly our environment was a scene of desolation. How could I alleviate the crisis for me and my family? I could not contemplate emigrating and leaving my relatives in such a bad situation. But the ground was so poor that it produced nothing. I took my courage in my hands and left for the other side of Gorom where, after several months, I finally found work with a dubious merchant who did not pay me properly. Still, it was better than nothing. During this time my wife stayed behind, waiting for a message to come and join me.

The region used to be full of wild and ferocious animals, such as lions, panthers, buffaloes, hyenas and jackals—and less aggressive animals, such as does and gazelles. We were graced with almost every species of
bird on the planet including wild ducks, ostriches, bustards and the
crowned crane. Now these times have become something of a legend and
the animals have disappeared as if under a spell.

In the past nobody would have believed that Gorom could grow into
such a big town. People migrated from isolated rural areas during the
drought, in search of jobs. They found themselves badly paid work and
stayed, waiting for better days. It was not easy to live in the town. The
mixture of different ethnic and social groups meant that people did not
easily integrate and there were problems of communication.

Women only moved if they came with their husbands. Divorced or
single women stayed in the place of their birth, since to do otherwise was
to appear coquettish.

Women’s social position has evolved greatly during my lifetime. In
the past, women stayed in the house to look after the children and cook.
Now they participate in all forms of economic and social activity: in the
office, in the factory or even in world affairs.

State support
The government has already made certain efforts to lighten our tasks,
bringing improvements in health, education and literacy. There have been
projects to sink wells, build dams and vaccinate the animals. The sick can
now be treated here instead of having to go to Dori or Ouagadougou. We
have also acquired grinding mills, animal-drawn ploughs and solar
cookers.

Children present us with increasing problems which preoccupy us
greatly. They no longer have any respect for the elderly. They have
become naughty and intolerant, refusing to work and turning to a life of
delinquency, drinking and drug-taking.

Our crucial problem is water. There are two sources of water here: the
ponds all around the village, and the wells. Yet our needs are great and
only the blacksmiths are satisfied with this quantity of water. Many of the
ponds dry up as soon as the rains become irregular. Water is shared by the
whole community and everyone is given free access, although we all pay
a small contribution to the running costs and repairs of the well. Years
ago our wells were only about 1 metre deep. The area we farmed was
small but we always reaped a good harvest. Today a family of 10 to 15
people may have up to three fields but their needs will not be satisfied.
Country Profile: NIGER

Human Development Index (UNDP): 155th out of 160 nations
Life expectancy at birth (1990): 45.5 years
Adult literacy (1985): male 32%; female 11%
Labour force employed in agriculture (1985-1988): 85%
GDP from agriculture and livestock (1988): 36.1%
Principal exports: uranium, live animals, cowpeas

1891 First French expedition arrives, and establishes Niger as a military territory by turn of century. 1921 Niger formally becomes French colony.