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Local and Regional Development

URBANIZATION, RURAL-URBAN LINKAGES AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR RURAL AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT: CASE STUDY FROM WEST AFRICA

Understanding rural-urban linkages and rural non-farm economies for growth and poverty alleviation

April 2000

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**URBANIZATION, RURAL-URBAN LINKAGES AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS
FOR RURAL AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT: CASE STUDY FROM WEST AFRICA**

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SUMMARY

West Africa in a process of rapid urbanization

In less than one century, West Africa is undergoing a tremendous change, with population increasing ten fold and urban population increasing one hundred fold, while rural population increases four fold. This change process is very rapid compared with the history of other regions.

A network of cities of all size is rapidly developing, from 600 cities (12% of total population) in 1960 to 2 500 cities (40% of total population) in 1990. It is forecasted that there will be not less than 6 000 cities in 2020, accounting for over 60% of total population. This situation has a key impact on agriculture and rural development, both for growth promotion and poverty alleviation.

Urban markets strongly influence agricultural transformation patterns

Cities represent the largest and fastest growing market for farmers, in a context where over 80% of total agricultural production are used for the regional consumption. But the influence of urban demand for food and labor is unevenly spread in the region, resulting in different dynamics. In areas fully exposed to the influence of urban markets, agriculture is in competition with non agricultural activities, for land use, employment as well as investment, under classical economic rules. These areas, often characterized by high population density and high density of exchanges, concern a growing proportion of rural population. In a second belt, markets influence is growing, but it not regular enough to have generated new regulation systems, giving rise to fierce competition over resources. Finally, very large areas in West Africa are still barely connected to markets. Some of these areas success to grow high value production than can make for the distance handicap; but most of them adapt by out-migration to better endowed areas. Growth in market size and in average income means that market demand is becoming stronger and more diverse over time, creating room for new products and new producing areas. In response to this growing demand, regional trade in agrofood products is expected to grow steadily in the coming decades.

Cities are key to the development of primary production; they also live off upstream and downstream services to production

The primary complex, defined as primary production with its upstream and downstream linkages, is evolving in response to the development of market-oriented agriculture, using a growing quantity of external input and selling a growing share of its production. The primary production witnesses a gradual reduction of its share in the overall primary complex activity. A lot of employment and value-added generated by agriculture is non-agricultural and urban based.

Conversely, the development of most medium size cities still depends primarily on their capacity to encourage primary production and find market niches for local products. Through national policies and technical projects, national governments and donors must encourage the early stages of the division of labor, between a reduced proportion of more efficient farmers and a nexus of service providers and consumers in the cities.

Approaching poverty at the medium scale

There is little room for improving the situation of the poorest as long as they remain in primarily self-sufficiency oriented systems, except with projects which are necessarily limited in their duration and geographical scope. It is only if and when the poor enter in the market economy, both for their incomes and for their needs, that policies and projects can assist them improve their situation.

The movement through which local urban-rural economies become more diverse and more complex creates a lot of new employment opportunities for the population, including the poorest. Rural households have taken stock of this situation. Their strategies include a mix of urban and rural activities, reflecting their willingness and ability to diversify their livelihood basis and seize new opportunities. Governments and donors intervention should primarily help them to pursue their own strategies including relocation and economic diversification. In this respect a comprehensive local approach is a useful complement to rural or urban approaches in understanding people's strategies and finding the best way to assist them.

A need to get back to strategy

What is most needed for economic growth and poverty alleviation is an approach that improves the mutual benefits of urban-rural relationship, which is what people actually live off. This involves a medium scale approach, including a secondary city and its network of smaller towns and rural surroundings. Such an approach is presently being implemented in West Africa by the Club du Sahel and the Municipal development program, in the context of growing decentralization in the region.

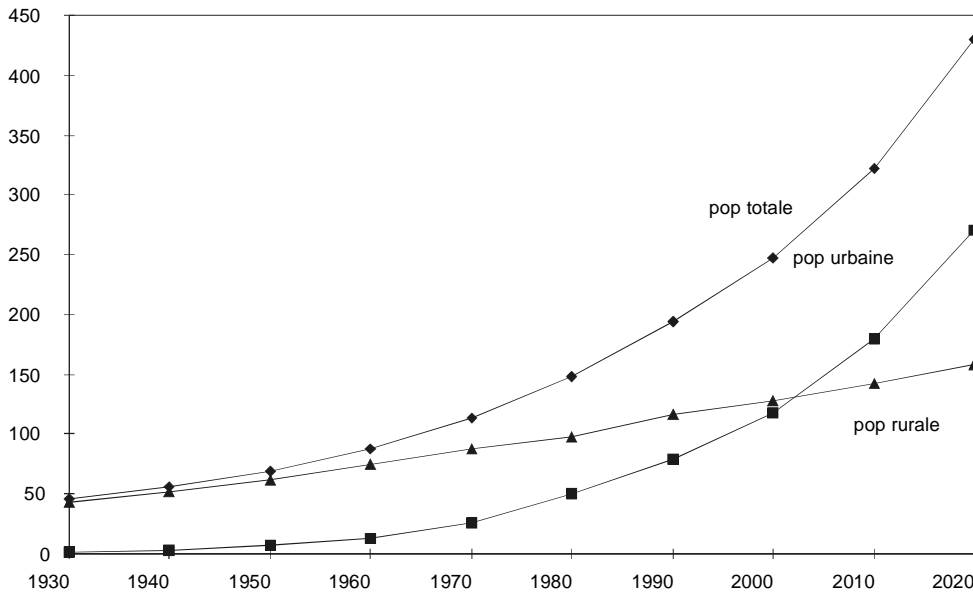
However, limited and unevenly distributed opportunities also mean that growth, poverty alleviation and other policy objectives cannot all be reached at the same time and everywhere, pointing at the critical need for strategic choices at the local and the national level.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEGATRENDS IN WEST AFRICA

Before addressing the implications of urbanization and urban-rural linkages for agriculture and rural development, a brief reminder of the megatrends and structural transformations, which affect the agricultural sector but also the demography and the economy of the entire West Africa region is necessary. The main elements of the long-term demo-economic framework to be kept in mind are the following:

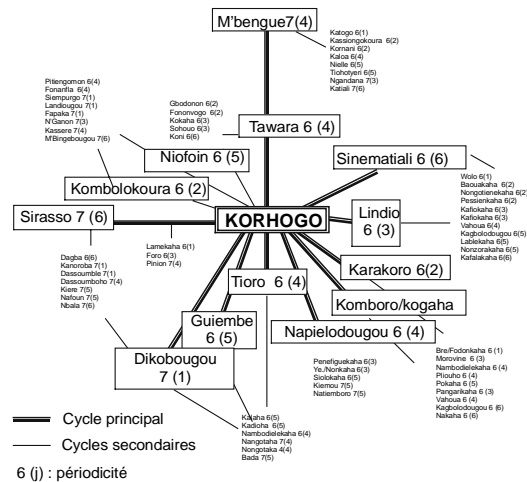
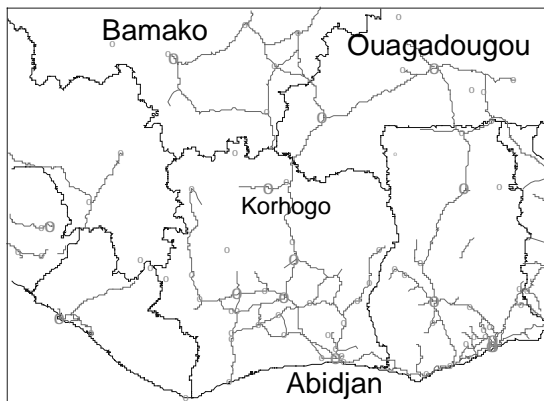
- In less than a century, from 1930 to 2020, the total population of West Africa will have increased tenfold;
- Such a growth of the overall population, combined with the opening up of the region to the world economy, involves continuous migrations, from poor areas to better endowed areas, from landlocked areas to market oriented areas, from remote rural areas to cities and periurban areas, from Sahelian countries to coastal countries. Urban population will have increased more than one hundredfold, while rural population will have increased fourfold: urbanization in West Africa does not imply a "desertification" of rural areas

Long term population trends in West Africa



- Contrary to conventional wisdom, West Africa urbanization is relatively well distributed: apart from local geographical and historical features, because the "industrial revolution" has not really affected West Africa, the networks of towns are largely dependent on the hierarchy and organization of the administration (determined nationally) and of trade (determined regionally or across borders). Despite the recent nature of these urban networks, the rank-size distribution in most countries and West Africa as a whole is quite regular, and shows no tendency to excessive primacy. Urbanization has affected all sizes of towns in every country.

The two sketches below show for example the position of Korhogo (Côte d'Ivoire) in the regional network of cities. On the one hand, Korhogo is included in a network of medium to large cities centered around Abidjan. On the other hand, Korhogo as a district capital, is the center of a network of smaller towns to which it is related by weekly markets



- Long term migratory flows are in part linked to climatic changes. However, the most important factor is the transformation of the economic and geopolitical environment. The emergence of the market economy disrupts the traditional economic structures and brings with it a major spatial redistribution of human activities and settlements. The distribution of the rural population is more and more determined by the size and location of the urban markets and by infrastructure, with the rural population density decreasing with the distance from the markets according to a similar law in the different agro-climatic zones. Agricultural output per hectare and per rural inhabitant as well as the surplus per farmer of farm products available for marketing tend to become a direct function of market attractiveness. The areas of dense rural settlement, located in the proximity of the major markets, are therefore those which generate the highest farm surpluses per farmer, despite the constraints imposed by their higher rural population densities.
- Urbanization is the main process through which this division of labor between consumers and producers of food is taking place
- With migrations and urbanization, the prospects for growth of the average commercial production (above local self-sufficiency) and income per farmer are virtually unlimited and so are the prospects for the long-term improvement in natural resource management.
- Population mobility is a necessary condition of sustainable development and poverty alleviation in West Africa. Any policy, program or action which tend to restrain mobility or to provide incentives for people to stay on their land would, in the long run, lead to unmanageable situations.
- In order to meet the regional demand for food in Sub-Saharan Africa, farm output per farmer should grow by two-thirds and farm surplus sold per farmer over and above his own consumption should more than double between now and 2020. This growth in average output would be translated into the emergence of food-crop farming, no longer organized on the basis of local self-sufficiency but for the regional market and capable of investment because it has increasing gross earnings. The transition from subsistence farming to commercial farming will occur at a pace that varies according to area. WALTPS forecasts that 15% of the total number of farmers will produce the amounts necessary to supply 40% of non-farming consumers, and their average output will thus reach five times the level of self- sufficiency, whereas the average productivity of the 85% other farmers will be of the order of twice the level of self- sufficiency.
- The view of the region's economy in 2020 highlights the context in which the farming sector is likely to evolve while simultaneously respecting the objective of a balance between agricultural imports and exports at the regional level, the need for significant increase in the standard of living of farmers, and the rational exploitation of natural resources.

LESSONS TO BE DRAWN FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES IN WEST AFRICA

By and large, all the features we have described here create a situation that is changing fast, with very little spatial or social uniformity, and in which people react with remarkable flexibility and fluidity.

For the three decades following independence, both the States and development agencies thought that changes in farming, especially intensification, could be brought about by massive investment in integrated projects, irrigation schemes, and "new land" projects, combined with the right policies. The reasoning behind farmers' behavior has often been under-estimated, and that behavior needs to be carefully examined to reveal what can and cannot be done.

More than it has been the case in the past, it is now recognized that development policies cannot oppose or reverse the on-going trends: they can only act at the margin of these evolutions. In this respect, human geography, the distribution and density of population, the emergence of markets that allow specialization, diversification of crops and division of labor all appear as essential factors in the behavior of farmers and in the restructuring of the agricultural geography which must be understood and taken into account.

Following are some concrete examples of policy implications.

- Planing operations with a view to medium-term change
- Taking account of location and labor competition factors in production strategies
- Paying particular attention to peri-urban farming
- Improving the town services to the countryside
- Taking a dynamic view of demand growth for conquest of urban markets
- Approaching poverty locally rather than in urban or rural areas separately
- Beyond short term measures, attacking the structural dimension of poverty through population mobility

Planing operations with a view to medium-term change

West African rural areas and farm practice are changing rapidly as more land comes under cultivation, the economy diversifies and urban demand increases. Projects must take a stance with respect to current changes, to speed them up if they are positive changes or attempt to mitigate them if they seem negative; but projects cannot ignore these changes or oppose them directly, unless the context alters radically.

For example, a scheme to develop irrigated rice-farming for family consumption was set up in the densely-populated area around Korhogo. The project may appear to be justified by the situation of the families who live there, but it obviously runs counter to the trend towards local specialization in market gardening and dairy produce, and the fact that there is plenty of land for rain-fed crop farming only a few tens of kilometers from the town.

The way medium-sized towns are approached is especially important from this standpoint. These towns are fast-growing service centers and centers of consumption: many of them are growing at a rate of over 7% a year, their populations doubling in ten years. At this pace of change, and with the usual five-year duration from project design to the end of the operation, there are likely to be major changes between the time of the initial diagnosis and the moment when the product is delivered.

Taking account of current or likely changes is even more important with long-term policies (e.g. research policy), structural measures like land-tenure reform which take ten years or more to become fully effective, and structuring investments. Addressing problems with a short-term view entails a high risk of always being one step behind.

Take account of location and labor competition factors in production strategies

It is not enough for a crop to meet a need for it to be grown commercially; it must also provide an income that is competitive with alternative employment locally.

This is particularly true for irrigated areas: irrigation, which requires inputs, farm equipment and loans, presupposes good technical skills. Farmers who possess these skills are not usually the poorest and are already tending towards economic optimization. They will only start farming a crop if it is competitive with the alternatives. Rice-farming in the irrigated areas of the Kou valley, near Bobo, is consequently a failure. These small plots, which can be used only for rice, do not make competitive use of labor. But as the officially irrigated area falls into disuse, private irrigation on either side of the feeder canals is being successfully used for market gardening and horticulture.

The growing profitability of farm assets on the fringes of towns at first increases the pressure for exhaustive use of resources, and local residents are not always equipped to handle this. This situation destabilizes or radically alters customary land tenure practices. When urban market signals are reliable and supply can develop to meet demand, restructuring occurs, with the total disappearance of "free" land and the beginnings of a market paradigm, either via an "updated" traditional arrangement or via official property deeds. The transition is from a customary system to a "modernized" one driven by economic rationality, often including a phase of destructuring before restructuring occurs under new market forces.

Take the case of the fuelwood supply for towns in Mali. To supply large towns (Bamako) and towns a long way from any forest (Gao), the net must be cast further: over 90% of the total fuelwood supply for these two towns is now brought in by truck. Long distance transport costs raise the cost of wood in the towns: as a result, local wooded areas are appropriated de facto and are no longer freely available to woodcutters. Around Ségou and Koutiala, on the other hand, fuelwood is found locally: supply is still abundant and over half the wood for these towns is collected in the neighborhood in carts or other light vehicles. Energy costs remain low, and wood resources are virtually freely available to the woodcutters.

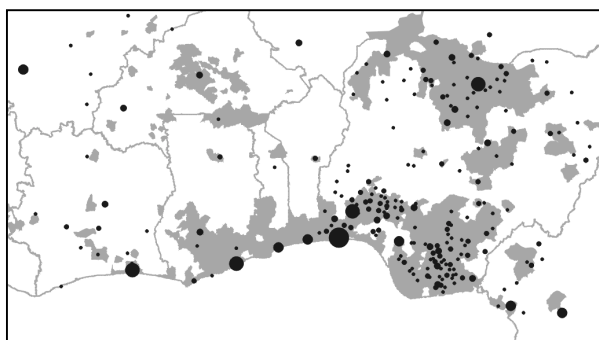
In this way, the maximum pressure from urban demand on natural resources (deforestation, extensive market farming) is usually to be found in an outer fringe around towns; it then tends to improve in the inner fringe. These areas are of great economic and environmental importance and should receive particular attention.

Pay particular attention to peri-urban farming

The influence of towns causes farming to adapt in ways directly linked to urban demand, not only in the immediate neighborhood of the town but also further out along highways, the distance increasing with the size of town. Location also affects space-consuming non-farm activities such as housing and storage.

These peri-urban areas, often officially classified as rural, are seeing rapid population growth, either by net in-migration or by lower out-migration. They account for a significant proportion of the rural population.

The map below shows the geographic correlation between areas of rural density over 50 inhabitants per sq.km (in gray) and cities over 50000 (in black) (all values for 1990, from the Waltps data base) in the Gulf of Guinea.



The specific conditions of peri-urban farming need, therefore, to be understood:

- Peri-urban farming has certain advantages: services and capital available in town, advantageous location with respect to urban markets or export circuits for fragile products, a supply of organic waste from the town, a young and educated labor force, a melting-pot of ethnic and cultural groups that encourages exchange of experience and innovation;
- But there are also major constraints: labor costs are high because of competition from employment in town; land is dear because of competing uses; as traditional land tenure regulation collapses it is not always replaced by an official system, and tenure becomes insecure; there are health problems related to water quality and the use of city wastes as organic fertilizer; and the town continues to grow, so that some inner fringe farmers have to move out.

The result is a high degree of farm specialization: perishable high-value-added products (market garden produce, fruit, milk, flowers and vegetables for export); heavy high-yield produce (cassava); small industrial units for products suitable for economies of scale (chickens, eggs, pigs) or for technological change (pasteurized/packaged milk); fresh fodder for backyard livestock in the town.

Benefiting from seasonal differences or by highly effective marketing, some more distant areas manage to occupy market niches by developing "marks of origin" (red onions from Niger, yams from the Lobi lands).

Improve the town services to the countryside

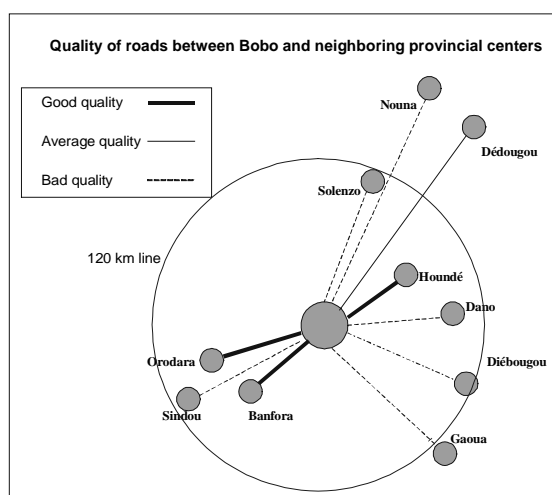
Rather than ignoring or trying to bypass the towns, the focus should be on putting the towns at the service of the countryside, which is still the main source of wealth of African towns. The towns must not only provide services upstream and downstream of farm production to enable products to reach the final market under good conditions, but also a full range of goods and services that can bring farmers' savings into circulation locally: like education, capital equipment, leisure, etc.

In the case of Saint-Louis and the district of Dagana in Senegal, the table below highlights the high reliance of this medium size Africa city on primary production, which with its upward and downward linkages contributes for 50% to the city's economy. It also shows the importance of the city in the agrofood sector, since Saint-Louis and the other cities of the district (Richard-Toll and Dagana) contribute two-thirds of the total activity in this complex.

	Saint-Louis	Richard-Toll and Dagana	Rural areas	Total
Primary production	9.4	3	12	24.4
Production of goods and services, upstream	2.3	1	0.5	3.8
Production of goods and services, downstream	2.5	17.4	1.5	21.4
Trade, upstream	1.5	0.2	0.1	1.8
Trade, downstream	13	1.8	1.1	15.9
Total upstream and downstream activities linked to primary production	19.3	20.4	3.2	42.9
Total primary complex	28.7	23.4	15.2	67.3
Primary complex/ total GLP (%)	49%	78%	79%	62%

From this standpoint, it is crucial to work with the authorities and urban opinion leaders so that they understand what investments the urban community must make to ensure that farm markets run smoothly and in turn ensure the town's prosperity and development. From this viewpoint, one must not think about town and country in contrast to each other but try to maximize the synergy between them, so that the area will develop as a whole.

Bobo Dioulasso is the center of the most productive agricultural area in Burkina Faso. Bobo is the gathering place for food staples originating areas located East or South-East from Bobo (Houet, Kéné Dougou, Comoé) or North of the city (Dédougou and Nouna). Food is then re-dispatched on the whole national territory and in the neighboring countries. The sketch below shows that the commercial infrastructure for agricultural trade is very insufficient. Improving rural roads and markets infrastructures would lower transaction costs and increase the volume of food marketed through Bobo, hence improving the city economy and regional role as well as farmers income.



Another example: in the Sikasso district in Mali, potatoes are cultivated in over 100 villages, for a total area of over 1700 ha. Production is estimated to represent roughly 50 000 metric tons, with an average yield of 30 tons per hectare. Net income can be very high. In 1996, net income was estimated to reach 1,8 million FCFA per hectare, compared with 126 500 FCFA for cotton. Potatoes cultivation was the third source of agricultural income after cotton and cereals. From 1994 to 1996, 60% of total production was

sold on the Malign market, and 40% exported to Côte d'Ivoire. In 1997, exportations to Côte d'Ivoire have suddenly dropped, apparently due to competing supply from South African republic. Growing potatoes requires a large investment by farmers' standards. If production is to be sustainably developed, marketing has to be secured as far as possible. In this respect, cold storage infrastructure in Sikasso, would allow the producers to better manage the marketing, avoid the low prices during the peak production season of February and March, and would allow Sikasso traders to become regular partners of Ivorian markets. But this is not yet the case: Sikasso still acts as a transit area for agricultural products, rather than a regional products promotion center. Fruit producers encounter the same problems: in the absence of adequate storage infrastructure, losses are estimated to reach 50% for oranges and 40% for mangoes. The connection of the city to the electric network for commercial and industrial use, as well as the development of storage and transformation units have been identified as a common priority for urban as well as rural entrepreneurs.

Take a dynamic view of demand growth for reconquest of urban markets

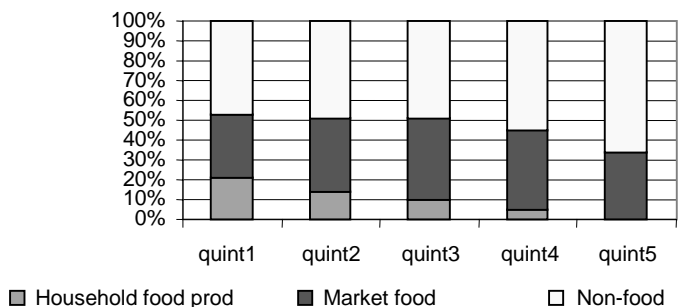
Since the massive failure of food policies in the 70's, aid operations have mainly concentrated on export potential (plantations, cotton, groundnut, fruit and vegetables), often with appreciable results. Now, there is a need to come back to the domestic market.

This probably requires different methods of work. Export crops involve only a minority of farmers, represent a small part of agricultural value-added (less than 10% in the average African country), and often have rather narrow trade channels: the local market for cotton or extra-fine French beans is rarely a serious competitor for the export market, in terms of either volume or price. These narrow trade channels have enabled public and private operators to develop services to farmers at low risk to themselves: cropping season or equipment loans, advisory services inputs, as control over marketing made it possible to ensure repayment of any costs advanced. They have also encouraged to lose sight of farmers' broader context (Thus the cotton companies' analyses speak of inputs being "diverted" to food crops). They have also often prompted them to organize turnkey services rather than using local service providers (transporters, traders, input distributors, financial services etc.), which would help the latter improve their performance. This attitude has restricted possibilities for subsequent development and agricultural diversification. There are unfortunately many examples of this situation throughout the region.

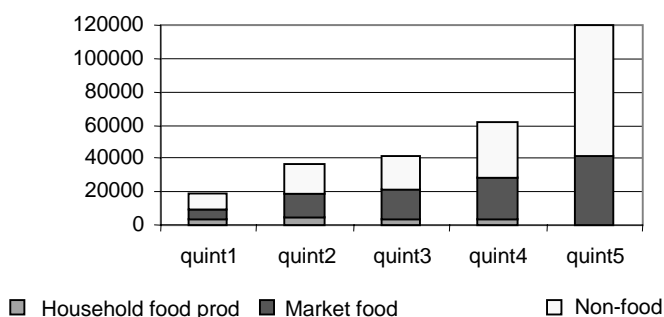
Supporting production for urban markets is a very different activity, because it food is still central to the organization of African countries: it represents half of the average family budget. Therefore, food markets are very complex and their evolution affects the whole society. Any attempt to work on this market has to rely on a very good knowledge of rapidly changing supply and demand. Such large firms that invest in the African market, e.g. Nestlé, have developed a very efficient system of surveys on the economic, social and cultural determinants of urban demand. Alongside these systems, food security strategies of governments and donors seem rudimentary and much focused on staples, whereas most market development concerns a diversified range of foodstuffs.

Care must be taken not to see markets merely in terms of food staples: food diversification offers much better prospects. It allows different regions and individual farmers to make the most of their comparative advantages, whereas cereal farming, with its big potential for economies of scale, is more favorable for the large farms of the savanna lands. This diversification will lead to more inter-regional trade, making food markets more resilient. Lastly, focusing on diversification products is a matter of realism, since the process has already begun: even in Mali, where the mean income is one of the lowest in the world, only 35% of a family's food budget is spent on grain. As income rises, this percentage shrinks and diets diversify with fruit, vegetables, oilseeds, meat, dairy products and sugar, which all respond to income level with greater elasticity than do the food staples. Supply must therefore be organized to adjust primarily to growing demand for these products.

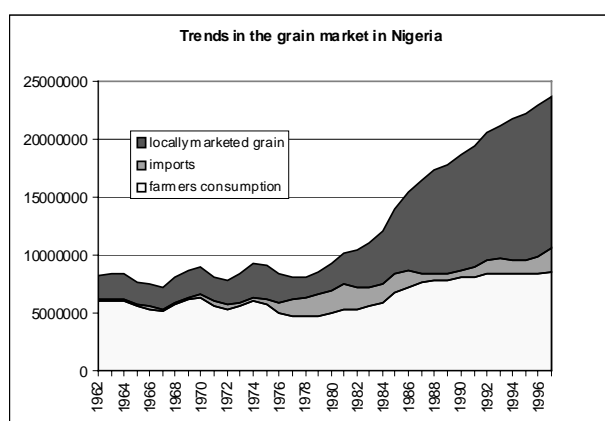
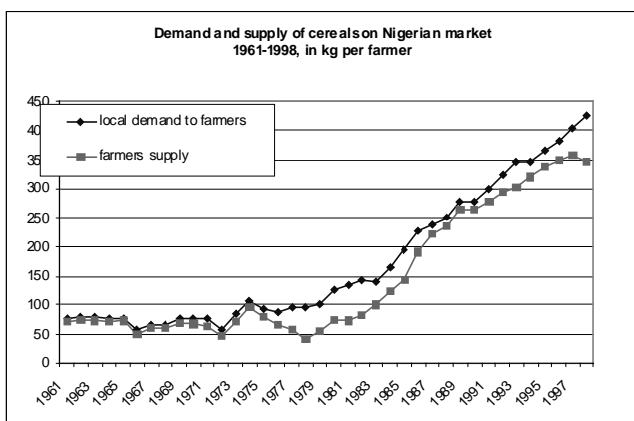
Consumption by income quintiles in Burkina Faso (%)



Consumption by income quintiles in Burkina Faso (total value)



Even in the case of cereals, which suffer from highly subsidized northern competitors, the example of Nigeria shows that with a strong policy, one country can supply most of its needs, even in the context of a rapidly growing urban demand. Nigeria, the biggest country of West Africa and one of the most urbanized imports only 12 US\$ per capita of agro-food products yearly, half of the rest of the region average among which grain imports amount to only 29% of the total value of food imports.



Approaching poverty locally rather than in urban or rural areas separately

Following WALTPS, the ECOLOC program ("Managing the economy locally in West Africa") confirms that the economy of an African country can be interpreted not only as a combination of sectors and branches but also, and not least, as a congruence of local economies in small regions comprising an urban center and its rural hinterland. The Ecoloc case studies show that the great majority of the population lives and works at the so-called "base level" of the economy. This "base level economy" provides a significant proportion of the essential needs of households and micro-enterprises, as well as a significant proportion of the household incomes. This world in which most economic agents see themselves and act is more urban-rural than either urban or rural.

At the local level, the traditional divisions between farm and non-farm sectors, and towns and rural areas, appear artificial. Ecoloc case studies also show that the level of activity in this base level economy is directly linked to population dynamics and to the capacity of economic agents to interact, buy and sell, process and exchange local goods and services, send and receive remittances, etc. Ecoloc case studies also show that the mobilization of local resources by local governments may have a relatively high multiplier effect on the local economy, through local public expenditure which has a low "import" content. Finally, Ecoloc case studies confirm that the level of activity in this base level economy is generally not limited by supply constraints, but rather by a lack of fluidity of exchanges, by poor physical environment, by poor circulation of information and, of course, by the low purchasing power of local agents, including local governments.

All this suggests a new approach to policies and programs to fight against poverty: the idea is to address this issue **locally**, which is to say at the level of urban-centered areas of the type of those surveyed in the Ecoloc program, at the same time in the town and in the rural hinterland.

One way to strengthen the local economy is to increase the capacity of both urban and rural dwellers to interact, to have one foot in the center and one foot in the hinterland, to react to opportunities. One way to prime the pump of the virtuous circle of expenditure-production-income is to start with an increase of local public expenditure, which is presently dramatically low, of the order of half a percent of the local gross product. This public expenditure would be focused on items intended to increase the fluidity of local exchanges and to help local entrepreneurs to take initiatives: maintenance of public facilities, improvement of infrastructure, linkage of urban and rural market places, opening up of areas for peri-urban activity, etc. The financing of this local public expenditure might combine public resources coming from central government and foreign transfers, with resources mobilized locally: households and SMEs would be given the necessary income (through local public expenditure) to actually pay local taxes, indeed to pay three to five times more taxes than they do today. The HIDI initiative (debt relief in the highly indebted low income countries) might help to launch this new approach to poverty alleviation.

Beyond short term measures, attacking the structural dimension of poverty through population mobility

Africa is a very big continent, with very low average population density: it is three times as big as China but has less than half the population. There are some high population density regions like Nigeria and the Great Lakes region, but these are still the exception. All in all, Africa is still a fairly empty continent. Many parts are isolated and will be so for a long time to come, because the region does not have the means to build adequate infrastructure to cover the whole territory.

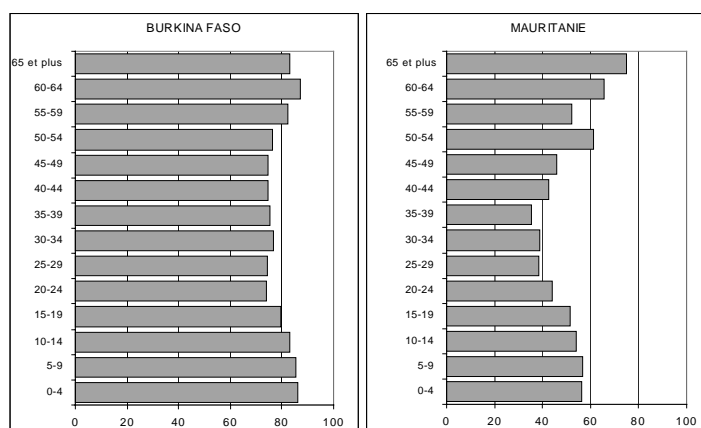
That is why Africa varies so widely from place to place, in its settlement structure, access to basic infrastructure and access to economic opportunities. Even off-farm employment is very limited in the most remote regions because purchasing power is so low (Bryceson). The counterpart of this great spatial

variability is the strong tendency for people to move closer to the more favored areas. Development aid should not hamper the movement of people, which is a rational answer to this situation. Migration will naturally give way to the movement of goods as the continent's population and economic activity becomes denser.

In the long run, it is clear that the best way of guaranteeing rapid and sustained growth in average income per farmer is to encourage (or at least not impede) the division of labor between producers (farmers) and consumers (mainly town dwellers). As we have seen, we may expect that continued urbanization will be accompanied over the years by a growth in the *average* net income per farmer of some 3% a year. There is no point in hoping for a sustainable effect on farmer incomes from rigging prices, especially since the relative prices of farm produce compared with other goods and services are likely to decline over time.

It should be borne in mind that the transformation of agriculture in response to the needs of the regional market is not occurring at an equal pace throughout West Africa. WALTIPS suggests that by 2020 roughly 15% of all the farmers in the region will be producing enough surplus food to supply 40% of urban consumers. Their average productivity will be five times local self-sufficiency, while the average productivity of other farmers is unlikely to exceed twice self-sufficiency. One response of the rural population to the trend towards greater inequality linked to market access will be, as it has been in the past, geographical mobility. Rural poverty reduction will need to include measures that encourage this mobility; any measure that tended to reduce emigration from the most marginal rural areas would defeat that object.

The graph below shows the proportion of male population living in the rural areas depending on their age. It clearly shows that the young adults are much less represented in the rural areas than the older people of the children. This reflects a strategy in which those who can more easily sell their labor go to wealthier areas but their dependant remain in the rural area where life is less expensive and social control stronger. This strategy appears to be much stronger in Mauritania, with limited agricultural potential, than in Burkina Faso (data from the CILSS/Remuao demographic study).



In urban areas, one must remind that one of the functions of towns is to attract the maximum number of people compatible with subsistence in the urban environment. The new town dwellers discover that the cost of subsistence is three times higher in town than where they came from. By migrating they have become poor with respect to their neighbors. But they have decided to migrate because they had some purpose, the purpose of bettering themselves. So they will try to rise to the standard of living required by their new surroundings, and experience shows that a major proportion of them will succeed. Analysis of this dynamic process shows that the proportion of poor people in a town is an increasing function of that town's growth rate. In a country in settlement transition, a town that has no poor would be evidence that that town is not playing its part in the necessary restructuring of settlement patterns: it would be an apartheid town.

So it is not the presence of poor people in town that should cause concern, but the average time taken to assimilate migrants. Very broadly speaking, one of the prime functions of towns is to make an increasing number of people realize that they need to achieve a standard of living, a level of expenditure and income and a level of productivity above the average of their present environment, to provide these people with incentives to move, and to help these "new poor" assimilate rapidly into their new surroundings.

CONCLUSION: BACK TO STRATEGIC THINKING

The current situation in West Africa and sub-Saharan Africa in general involves an interplay of opportunities and limitations. The opportunities are connected with the size of the African market, land availability and the fast pace of change, while limitations are imposed by the fragile environment, the small degree of economic diversification, the low level of education and training for men and women, and an international context that is not favorable to Africa. In this situation, Africa may well undergo rapid economic growth in the coming decades, but it would be quite mistaken to think it can enjoy rapid growth while simultaneously taking charge of all the environmental and social costs of the changes taking place. These transition phases have been difficult times in every part of the world; it is unlikely to be any easier in Africa, which is going through the process faster and in a less favorable historical context than other regions.

So it must be borne in mind that there is no technically perfect solution to all problems simultaneously: all pathways of progress have advantages and limitations, winners and losers. In this situation, the decisions to be made are not technical but essentially political, and must be taken not by technicians but by African society.

The international aid system does not have the technical or financial means to overcome these limitations and it must adapt its discourse in consequence. Instead of a moral discourse on all the priorities the African countries ought to be pursuing simultaneously (economic growth, democratic governance, poverty alleviation, promoting women and young people, protecting the environment, etc.) with the risk this entails of spreading efforts too thin, it should be strongly encouraging African societies to select their own strategic priorities, and should then concentrate efforts on those fields.

This depends on two preconditions:

- A comprehensive vision of how the different regions, environments and social groups interact, and a notion of the scale of the problems and potentialities. In short a dynamic, systemic and quantified vision of African societies and economies, a veritable map for choosing a development pathway.
- An organized debate about the system and how it can evolve, involving stakeholders in all their diversity. There are two major dangers in this regard: that the strategy debate be taken over by technicians, whereas it is primarily of a political nature, or that a sectoral lobby take it over to the detriment of a pluralistic debate. This debate cannot be organized in a hurry; it is a slow-maturing process. This explains the poor results of most attempts of this kind, which have been bound by short-term schedules.

Lastly, the experience of the Club du Sahel shows that this debate can usefully be conducted at several levels:

- At the national level: a return to the participatory debate on development strategies is much in vogue at the moment: whether general or sectoral, it is promoted by the World Bank with the CDF and PRSP, by the OECD with NSSD, by the UN with UNCCD, etc. The main problems encountered in these processes are often the same: too short a timetable; a lack of structured debating partners so that partners are chosen ad hoc; lack of information on the system at the outset, trends, available tools and existing means for mobilizing them; and weak impact on the actual practices of decision-makers in government and aid agencies. What is probably needed is fewer exercises, but conducted in greater depth and in more direct contact with operations.
- Local level. At village level, the participatory debate about the future has been widely promoted since the 1980s through "local development" and "local resource management" approaches. For the past few years the Club du Sahel and the Municipal Development Program (PDM) have been trying out an approach through information and strategic debate at the intermediate level of an average-sized town and its hinterland. This is the Ecoloc approach to reviving local economies. The program constructs a polyvalent vision of a local economy and its possible futures, making the most of local information and stakeholders and providing methodological support to set up an information system. This vision is then debated with local opinion leaders and results in a local development program. About twelve localities have already begun this process. Experience with the Ecoloc process shows that well-organized, interactive information is a powerful stimulant to democratic debate, and highlights the pertinence of a "meso-development" approach. The small region is a more relevant focus than the village for thinking about medium-term economic development and diversification, and because it is politically and socio-culturally more homogeneous than the country as a whole, it facilitates the debate on strategic choices.