

COOPERATIVES IN BURKINA FASO

A SPIRIT OF SELF-DEVELOPMENT

No access to the sea, a difficult climate and poor soil, clearly inadequate sources of energy, a subsoil lacking in raw materials, emigration of youth to the Ivory Coast, a weak internal market... These are some of the problems of Burkina Faso (the new name of Upper Volta since the military coup of August 1983). The country is among the poorest on earth. All the same, many of its people think it can leave underdevelopment behind by using co-operatives as an instrument of progress.

Burkina Faso has co-operatives in the areas of market gardening, rice production, artisanal orchards, livestock raising, crafts, savings, and credit. Although the market gardening and livestock co-operatives have a turnover of several hundred million CFA Francs (CA\$1 = 350 FCFA) and the savings and credit co-operatives have built up savings of 300 million FCFA (\$850 000), they have not yet revolutionized the economic life of Burkina.

By FRANÇOIS HUOT



Burkina Faso's "Caisse populaires": Rapid growth of a cooperative industry.

Photo: François Huot

Southwest, there are in the Northwest those of the Union of Savings and Loan Associations of Upper Volta (UAVEC), and in the North Central area of the country one finds the savings banks of the Association for the Development of the Kaya Region (ADRK). With three different kinds of co-

operatives and savings philosophies, it is little wonder that there is still not a national union of savings and loan co-operatives.

Worse still, all the co-operatives find it difficult to get back the money they have lent. The economic health of the savings banks, which are recognized as the strongest, could have been seriously endangered had there not been a change of direction last March. Before the beginning of 'Operation Payback' the total in non-performing or overdue loans was 77 million FCFA (\$256 000), about 30 percent of all savings. By the use of extreme methods — calling in the police and suing — the situation was successfully reversed.

This state of affairs reveals social and cultural limitations. The members of the credit committees and the supervisors of the banks are often friends or relatives of the borrowers and often cannot refuse them a loan.

TRAINING NEEDS

Whether in the savings banks or in other kinds of co-operatives, everywhere one runs into the problem of training. Speaking of these difficulties, Blaise and Robert Ouedraogo refer to "the organization, the adaptation, the training of people". These are not the only limitations. The lack of material and financial resources, the climate (insufficient rainfall in particular), and an inadequate system of highways all severely tax any efforts at development.

But the basic need and necessary condition for development is training. Without it there can be no economic progress. It is often, however, "the most difficult condition to meet," says Gilles Morin, chief adviser to the Société de développement international Desjardins (SDID) in Burkina. The importance of training is exemplified by the policies of the savings banks of Bougouriba. Although they have attained a measure of financial and administrative autonomy, they continue to place major emphasis on training.

What about the future of the cooperative movement in Burkina? "The outlook is most promising," says Morin. "Philosophically co-ops are consistent with the government's intention to give priority to organizations set up by villagers. Economically, they can take over from the State, which simply doesn't have the resources to look after everything." □

François Huot is a Quebec freelance journalist. He recently visited Burkina Faso to study the development of co-operatives as part of a project of the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec, supported by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

A MARGINAL SECTOR

In this country with six million people and a Gross National Product of \$1 billion, co-operatives remain a marginal sector among the various economic forces. But their impact should not be judged solely in economic terms. When they were asked to assess the success of the co-operatives, social scientists Blaise and Robert Ouedraogo both said that such organizations had contributed to a change in mentality. "Before the co-ops started," they said, "the peasants would say 'come and do something for us'. Nowadays they ask us to come and help them to do something." The success of the co-operatives has been in arousing a spirit of self-development, a spirit of autonomy which often takes the form of criticism of government representatives.

Both sociologists are active 'field' researchers. They and about 10 others are conducting 'action-research' in a training program run by the International University Cooperative (IUC) and funded by IDRC. IUC is an international network of university people and universities set up in 1977. It works as a kind of 'long distance university', teaching not by radio or correspondence but through professors who visit Burkina regularly.

SUPPORT FROM LOCAL SAVINGS

It is the savings co-operatives that have made the most progress in the last 12 years. They have about 18 000 members spread among 40 co-operatives and 86 branches.

Although the average per capita annual income in Burkina is only around 87 500 FCFA (\$250), average savings are close to 16 000 FCFA (\$45). The country thus has considerable potential for savings. The problem is that the savings and loan co-operatives in Burkina do not share a common philosophy or function in the same way. In addition to the savings banks concentrated in the