



The forgotten poor in Africa's 'back of beyond'



JASON O'BRIEN

THE city of Ouagadougou has similar connotations for the French community as the relatively close city of Timbuktu has for many of us in Ireland.

It is the back of beyond, a jocular threat to a foreign diplomat, shorthand for 'the middle of nowhere' rather than anything that suggests a heaving, sprawling, dusty capital.

It suffers from an identity problem - like the rest of Burkina Faso - in that, in reality, it hasn't got one in much of the developed world.

Burkina's whereabouts is vague, its problems vaguer still.

Neither Bono nor Bob has turned the world's spotlight here. It hasn't had colourful, brutal dictators to make the United Nations bluster.

Its natural resources are not worth fighting over. It hasn't been hit by a spectacular, sudden natural disaster like an earthquake. It won't add a colourful presence to the imminent World Cup.

Put simply, Burkina Faso isn't sexy.

But that matters little to the UN's poverty index, which rates Burkina as the world's third-poorest country.

Up to half of its 16 million population lives on less than a euro a day - many on significantly less - and in mud-walled huts without running water or electricity.

Kids with distended bellies and red tinges in their black hair - due to a lack of quantity, variety and quality in their diet - are common in the largely-rural population.

This is the reality, and it is getting darker.

"The problem of drought is not new," Jean-Claude Wedraogo, deputy country director with **Self Help Africa**, said yesterday.

"Burkina is at the entrance of the Saharan region so the climate conditions are poor, we don't have enough rains and they are difficult to predict."

Recurring drought doesn't set the pulse of the international community racing, however. Nor does climate change, which has ensured the rainy season has been shortening and the amount of rainfall steadily decreasing.

"Last year we (also) got floods," Mr Wedraogo added, explaining that much of the rain came at once.

"These floods damaged a lot of construction, produce and killed animals, washed away soils."

"So it is certainly getting worse. We are increasingly vulnerable and we hope people will increasingly look at the western region of **Africa**, and to us."

The Burkinabes are known for their optimism.

That same optimism holds that current president, Blaise Compaore, will not serve a further term in 2015 after an expected victory in elections next November. He has already been at the helm for 23 years. "This year we are going to celebrate 50 years of independence (from French colonial rule) but what progress can we show for it?"

"We still remain poor. It's a

matter of organisation. You cannot rely all the time on outside countries."

Especially when outside countries aren't all that bothered. Indeed, the old mantra of 'a hand up rather than a hand out' seems the best Burkina can hope for, and has the added, real benefit of long-term sustainability.

The slow, unglamorous work of empowering communities is already making some - albeit small - inroads.

Angelina Jolie is unlikely to visit the 4,360 inhabitants of Dassui village or their market gardening scheme - 140km south of Ouagadougou - any time soon.

Nonetheless, the scheme has flourished since it was introduced by Self Help and its partners in 2008, providing 40 of the villagers with detailed knowledge of sustainable agriculture activities, soil conservation, composting and well-building.

For Zourbrana Bawa (33), it meant quadrupling her annual income from sales at the local market to €150 last year. It's not small potatoes here.

"My 17-year-old son has spoken about leaving the village to find work but I hope this can convince him to stay," the mother of five said through an interpreter. "It has meant I have had money for school fees and medicine for the others."

"It's my money and I can keep it, but if there is an issue I decide with my husband what to do."

Which is as it should be, as Ms Bawa does most of the work.

She is her husband's second wife, with polygamy common throughout the largely Muslim country. She lives in the same cramped hut as his first wife and her children, but there are Catholics in the community too.

Ms Bawa laughed when

asked if she got along with her husband's first partner, and laughter was as much in evidence as the distended bellies and the struggle to work the unforgiving red earth.

"It is not fake - we are not laughing to hide something," Sawadogo Aminata said. "We are optimistic in Burkina, very optimistic. We are not fond of complaining - we hope it will be better for us."

And it was better in Dassui, better than it had been, slowly improving. But the only source of electricity is a single car battery. Only a few children get to school. There are precious few over the age of 45.

And this is a village that has received help. Thousands have not.

Back in Ouagadougou - home to over 1.5 million and the largest per capita ownership of mopeds in the world - air-conditioned hotels, excellent WiFi, and well-stocked pharmacies are commonplace.

It shouldn't be dismissed as a joke. It exists, and it is not in the dark ages.

The 800 villages in Burkina are a different matter.

● For more information, visit www.selfhelpafrica.com

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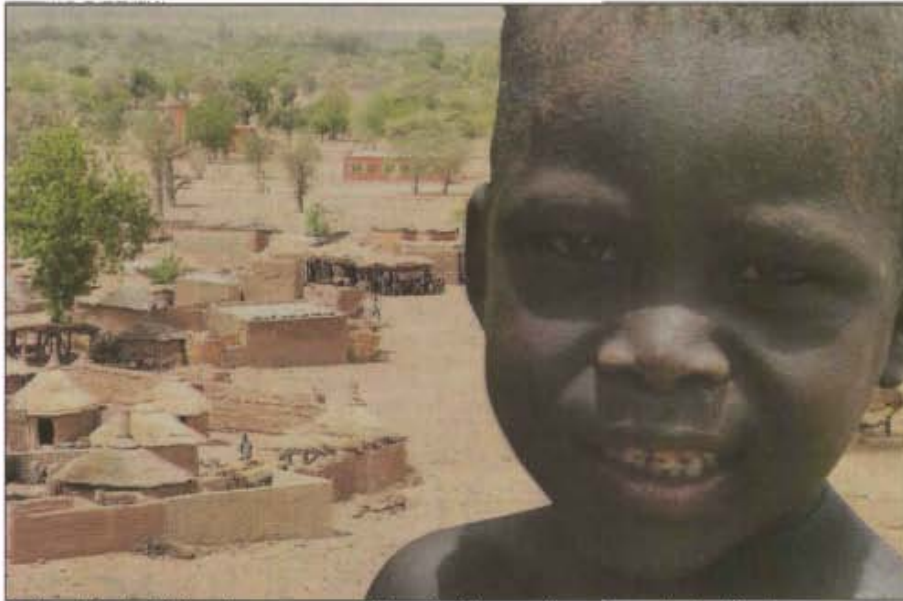
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Malnutrition in children is a common problem in villages such as this one in Burkina Faso.

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