



Irish agency helping people of Burkino help themselves

An Irish aid agency is leading the way in helping some of Africa's poorest people and places help themselves out of poverty, writes **George Jacob**

If you've heard of Burkina Faso, it's probably because it was being described as one of the poorest countries on the planet. Clinging to the southern edge of the Sahara desert, life is relentlessly harsh for its people.

Temperatures reach to the high forties and one-in-five children die before their fifth birthday. The World Food Programme feeds close to half-a-million people annually and malnutrition among its 15 million population is rampant.

Burkina Faso is a country that has been largely by-passed by the centuries old nomadic trading routes and in more recent times by tourist visitors, including even the hardy adventure travellers who now descend on that remotest of outposts Timbuktu, less than 250 miles to the north.

The country has also been by-passed by good fortune when the great geological events occurred which gave other countries oil, gas, coal, minerals and precious metals.

It surprises many to learn that, despite the soaring temperatures, Burkina Faso gets its share of rain – the country's annual average of between 600mm and 800mm per annum is not dissimilar to Ireland, but it can come almost at once and cause enormous destructive flooding, such as that which made nearly 50,000 people homeless last year.

Despite these adversities Burkina is not without hope. It is known as 'the land of 8,000 villages', a network of small communities dotted around the country who rely on their own ingenuity and the parched soil beneath their feet for survival.

Visit the right village and you find people who are determined not merely to scratch out a living from the sun-bleached and rock-hard soil. As world temperatures increase year on year, these communities, with a little outside help, are farming for Africa's future.

Irish Agency

SELF Help Africa is one of just a handful of Irish agencies working in Burkina Faso.

Established just over a quarter century ago at the time of the terrible Ethiopian Famine, the organisation works with rural communities so that farmers can produce more and better food and have access to markets for whatever surplus they produce.

The agency has been farmer-focused since its inception and counts among its earliest supporters the farmers cooperatives of Co Donegal, who provided several thousand tonnes of Cara seed potatoes for Ethiopia as part of an early 'self help' programme to get the country's food production systems on the move in the post-famine years.

And Self Help Africa continues to enjoy strong support in the north west, not least from the efforts of an Inishowen-based landowner and businessman Albert Doherty, who has raised tens of thousands of pounds for the cause and whose summertime sponsored row from Derry to Greencastle on Lough Foyle has become a major regional fundraiser for the charity.

Sika Village

AT SIKa village in Central Burkina Faso, life has become a little easier for this community of more than 800

people. Self Help Africa and its partner Per (Association Projet Ecologie et Reboisement) has been promoting increased farming productivity by adopting a simple and cost-effective soil and water conservation approach.

More than 90 acres of land has been restored at Sika in the past 18 months and more is set to follow after recent harvests produced crops of sorghum, millet and beans that were three and four times greater than before.

"It's labour intensive work", Self Help Africa organiser Jean Claude Wedraogo, left, says of a process that required farmers to hand dig thousands of small holes (known as 'zai' holes) in the earth and then fill each one with organic compost and manure.



"The benefits are not just in productivity, for the compost-filled zai holes return nutrients to the soil that will last up to five years, while the holes also act as an effective way of collecting and storing water when it does rain," he says.

Mr Wedraogo says that it is sometimes difficult for communities living on the breadline to remember that the land that produces their food today is the same land that they will need tomorrow.

"Across Africa you see land that has been turned to dust because of over farming and over grazing. With growing populations and with climate change it is becoming an even bigger challenge and it is one that we will only overcome if we encourage communities to farm sustainably, and if the support that we provide is

practical and appropriate to their needs," he says.

In Sika village, support from **Self Help Africa** included a series of training courses in soil and water conservation and in new farming methods, provision of a number of wheel-barrows and farm tools and the distribution of new and alternate variety seeds, which have allowed farming households to grow a range of new crops including groundnuts and early millet, for the first time.

Less than 50 miles down the road at Lelexe village, the focus is on beekeeping, with **Self Help Africa** supporting householders in establishing small businesses in the production and marketing of honey and bee products.

The venture is part of a wider collaboration between the **agency** and the Wend Yam Beekeeping Federation and is helping households in 10 neighbouring villages to develop beekeeping as an income-generating enterprise.

Sawatogo Aminato (40) is one of 50 women at Lelexe who are participating in the scheme and earned close to £100 from the sale of honey in the past year alone.

"The money that I earn from beekeeping had allowed me to buy clothing, shoes and books so that my children can go to school. It is also an insurance policy as I now have money I can use to buy food if I need to," she says.

"Insurance" is the word used too by mother-of-five Zungrana Awaya, when she speaks of the security that her family now has as a result of the £120 she earned from the recent sale of onions, cabbage and other vegetables.

Zungrana is the group secretary of the Wenden Kondo ('God will Provide') market gardening group being supported by **Self Help Africa** in Dasui village. She describes how the 41 group members received training in horticultural production and were given seed stock to begin vegetable growing.

"There is potential here for horticulture because they have a nearby water source," Mr Wedraogo explains.

"It had not been developed because people had neither the seed nor the know-how."

Wenden Kondo are already planning to expand their activities and the **Self Help Africa** organiser predicts that they will do so with little difficulty in the coming years.

"More than 250 people in this village are directly benefiting in the scheme and it has great potential. There is a ready market in the towns and villages for the vegetables that they grow and once the founding members have the knowledge, there is no reason why they cannot pass that on to others and expand the enterprise that already exists."

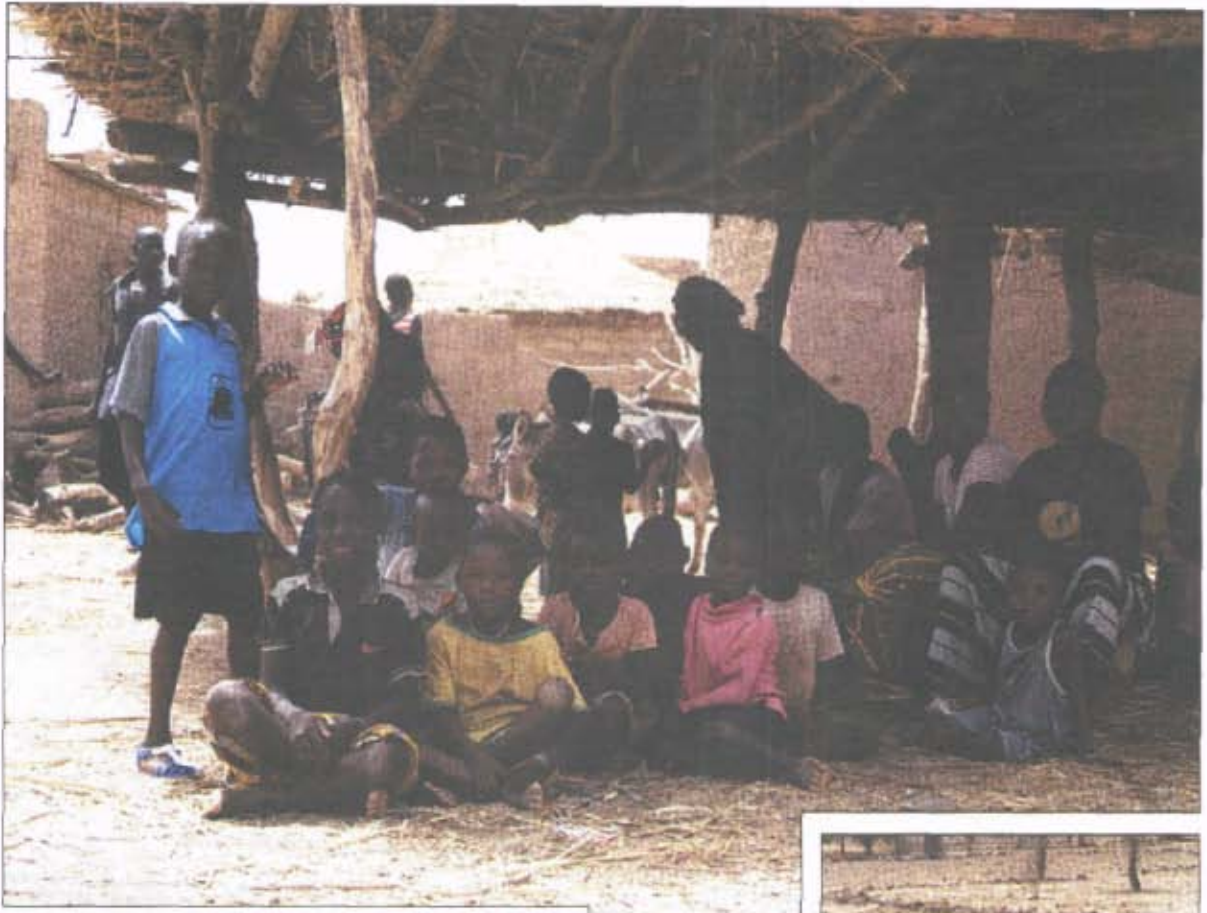
Self Help Africa

SELF Help **Africa** works in nine countries in sub-Saharan **Africa**, collaborating with more than 20 partner agencies on a total of nearly 50 long-term rural **development** projects.

The organisation has undergone significant **development** on the home front in recent times too and following an historic merger with the UK-based **agency** Harvest Help just two years ago, it was formally registered and launched in the US by former Irish president Mary Robinson, at a reception hosted by the Irish Consulate in New York, late last autumn.

■ To learn more and find out how you can help, visit www.selfhelpafrica.org

"As world temperatures increase year on year, these communities, with a little outside help, are farming for Africa's future"



■ **SELF HELP:** Above, mothers and children shade themselves from the sun in Sika village, Burkina Faso. Left, the beehives kept by villagers in Lelexe, Burkina Faso. The honey producers in the village are members of Wend Yam Beekeeping Federation. Right, restoring fertility to the land in Sika village is a slow, tedious and backbreaking job

