



Where climate change is not theory but life threat



Temperature is rising, rainfall is dwindling and poverty is grinding, writes **Conor Sweeney** in Sika, Burkina Faso

LAZING AROUND in the shade and sheltering from the 40-degree heat, domestic animals watch as their droppings are converted into compost by toiling west **African** villagers.

It all seems part of a hopeless task, as men and women strain to pound dried dung and plant stalks into fertiliser to be spread across the arid land. The landscape should more accurately be described as desert in the dry season and, because of climate change, it's becoming more of a struggle every year to keep it productive.

But in Burkina Faso, one of the poorest countries in the world, land-locked and dependent on remittances from its millions of migrant workers in neighbouring countries, there's no choice. Instead, four-fifths of its 14 million population try to squeeze crops from the only soil they have, because there's nothing else to do.

"Yes, we feel the impact of climate change. Basically it's getting hotter every year in the summer, particularly since around the year 2000. It's just not the same as it used to be, it's just too much," says villager Garbo Waongo.

"We see and feel that it's getting dryer and hotter but, at the same time as climate change, we are modernising our production which is helping compensate for it," he says, gesturing at a pile of compost. "Actually the climate has now become too unpredictable and there's just not enough rain."

Average temperatures across Burkina Faso are expected to rise 1.7 per cent by 2050 and the average annual rainfall is set to fall by 7.3 per cent over the same period, according to an environmental report for the UN's **Africa**

Renewal.

Waongo's village of Sika, with 800 inhabitants, about 100km (60 miles) from Burkina's capital Ougadougou, is exposed to the consequences of weather changes, although none of its inhabitants have caused or benefited from the industrialisation creating the problem. There is no electricity, no concrete dwellings, no cars and, consequently, no heating up the atmosphere with fossil fuels.

According to some statistics, Burkina Faso is the second-poorest country in the world, with one-quarter of the population surviving on less than a dollar a day. In Sika, where there seems to be no money circulating, crops and animals are bartered. Villagers live in simple straw huts, huddled together under a small hill with little escape from the intense heat.

"There's been difficulty growing crops over the past few years. In the past, there was 800mm of rain-water during the rainy season and now it's down to around 600-700mm and there's also a violent wind that's developed," said Paul Sawato, a local aid worker whose **agency** partners with Irish-based **Self Help Africa** to develop sustainable agricultural techniques in this and similar villages.

Sawato's projects are very simple, such as teaching locals how to make compost and to fertilise the land by spreading it directly around young plants in sheltered plots. There are no wells in the vicinity and a nearby village jealously guards a lake, so village women must leave their young children and get up at 3am to walk about four kilometres for water.

As the villagers demonstrate the composting process in the intense heat, a sudden sharp wind whips up sand and dust that pricks at exposed skin, offering a vivid demonstration of the violent climatic changes the villagers endure on a daily basis.

If access to the water supply were to deteriorate further for Sika villagers or if the temperatures continue to rise, one serious setback, such as a failed crop, would push them from poverty into destitution.

Self Help Africa also trains villagers in beekeeping or pays for irrigation techniques so small

patches of land can support market gardening. These provide a few euro for each worker, enough to pay school fees and some emergency medical supplies.

"Every day, we start the field work in the morning. Then at 12, we get the water and we go again in the evening. It's a hard job but because there is nothing else we can do, there is no choice," says Bawa Zoungrana in the village of Dassui. She has six children. "It's getting worse and worse because the soil is getting drier. There's not enough rain and we can't get enough from the soil even by using fertiliser," she says. Zoungrana is a member of a local group called "God will Provide".

And yet in villages like Sika where children wear no shoes and many have distended bellies from poor diets, some of the young men proudly show off the one piece of modern technology they do possess - working mobile phones.

"They leave the village and go to work in the gold mines not far from here and the first thing they do is buy a mobile phone," says Sawato. "And to charge them, we use a car battery," says one of the young men.

This is the first in a three-part series on West **Africa**. Conor Sweeney travelled to Burkina Faso with **Self Help Africa** (selfhelpafrica.org)

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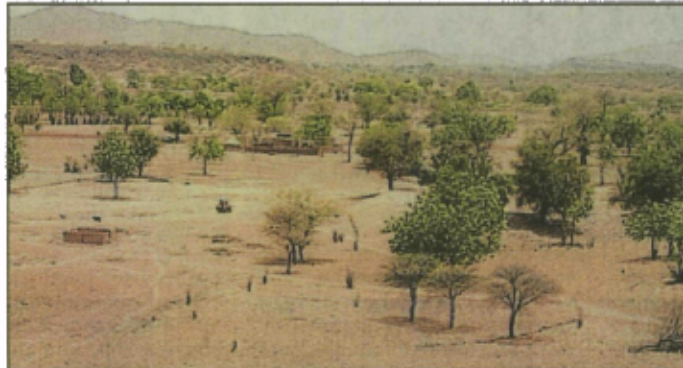
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The arid lands of Sika, 100km (60 miles) from Burkina Faso's capital, whose 800 inhabitants struggle to survive.