

Abdoulaye Mamoudou

Food in the Sahel—helping the people to grow their own

In 1984, Niger decided to encourage people suffering from the effects of the drought in the Sahel to grow crops in the dry season. Using simple and laborious methods, the people succeeded in irrigating selected plots of land and in producing significant quantities of cereals, tubers and other food crops. It is intended to improve and extend dry-season cropping in the light of the experience gained.

In Niger, as in all the countries of the Sahel, the 1984 crop-growing season was one of the worst of the last 10 years. The population came to realize the full implications of the persistent drought. However, instead of lamenting over the hardships imposed by nature and waiting passively for aid from abroad, the people launched themselves into an effort to grow crops in the dry season. This operation was initiated by the government and implemented by the development councils. The objectives were to minimize migration so that aid could be organized more effectively, to produce additional food crops, especially cereals, and to test the ability of administrative and developmental mechanisms to cope with emergencies. In August 1984 the government provided approximately US\$ 800 000 for the preparation of sites suitable for such crops in all seven departments of the country.

When the scheme was publicized there was an extraordinary rush to drain and till

hollows and low ground on the fringes of pools and large watercourses, and countless wells were sunk. All this involved rudimentary techniques and hard manual labour. However, the courage and tenacity of the people working on these sites was rewarded, and all concerned became convinced of the potential of dry-season crop production. Some 185 000 people contributed to the development of 700 sites, amounting to 70 000 ha. The main crops were cowpeas, maize, wheat, sugar-cane, potatoes, and vegetables including onions, tomatoes and marrows.

Yields were estimated at 12 330 tonnes of cereals, 195 000 tonnes of tubers, 5620 tonnes of cowpeas, and 447 960 tonnes of other crops. This achievement meant that the food crop shortage was greatly reduced. The high yields of vegetables and tubers led to a significant improvement in the quality of the people's diet and stimulated the development of new food-processing and storage techniques. The dry-season crops have somewhat overshadowed the traditional millet, and there has been a notable change in dietary customs, actively encouraged by the Association of Women of Niger.

Abdoulaye Mamoudou is with the Division of Information, Training and Documentation, National Development Council, Niamey, Niger.

Dry-season crops are a source of legitimate pride for Niger, and they should inspire all the nations of the Sahel to end the tragedy of hunger. Crop production in the dry season is now seen as more than an emergency measure; it is a decisive weapon in the country's fight for nutritional self-sufficiency and a tangible demonstration of the people's self-respect and ability to adapt to the harsh conditions of the present-day Sahel; it has come to stay and will be extended.

Technical improvements should make dry-season cropping still more beneficial. A detailed study of water resources will allow an increase in the areas developed and will

save some farmers from the heartbreaking spectacle of their crops dying because of a failure of water supplies just when they are most needed.

Various social problems arising from the concentration of people on the favourable sites will have to be solved, including the education of children and adults, and the provision of primary health care and a balanced diet, especially for mothers and children. There is also the question of the occupation of land by incomers. Eventually, one hopes, the sites for growing dry-season crops will be transformed into profitable production units and will form part of the overall rural development scene. □

Treating diarrhoea in children

Approximately 90% of children with watery diarrhoea who visit a health care facility can be successfully and optimally treated solely with oral rehydration therapy and continued feeding. Antibiotic or antiparasitic therapy should be reserved for patients with dysentery, proven or presumed cholera, or proven infection with Entamoeba histolytica or Giardia lamblia. Currently available adjunct agents, including antimotility and antisecretory agents, exogenous aciduric flora and adsorbents have no practical value and increase both the cost of treatment and the risk of adverse reactions. The practice encountered in many countries of routinely treating episodes of diarrhoea with multiple adjunct agents and antibiotics, sometimes available as combination drugs, is to be deplored. Oral rehydration therapy is the only proven cost-effective method of treating diarrhoea and the economic savings from treating the disease in this way can be considerable.

—Drugs in the management of acute diarrhoea in infants and young children. Geneva, World Health Organization, 1986 (unpublished document CDD/CMT/86.1)