

# AAINews

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## Reflections Upon the Souvenir Sellers of Burkina Faso

My mission as part of JICA's preliminary survey team took me to Burkina Faso in West Africa this January. The name Burkina Faso means "The Land of Upright People". The country used to be called Outo Volta since its independence in 1960, but it was renamed in 1984. Although my visit was very short, I got a positive impression of the people as being honest and reserved. Their sincerity and punctuality actually came as a sort of shock for me because I had been accustomed to "Insha Allah" attitude of people in the Middle East.

The JICA survey was to look into the forest conservation planning in Comoè Province in the south-western part of the country. Unlike the Sahelian region in the northern part that is facing the problem of desertification, this target area is relatively wet with some forest cover still remaining. In recent years, however, problems of degradation and reduction of forest resources in this area have been on the rise due to illegal logging, shifting cultivation, over grazing, forest fires etc. This is why there is a need to establish a system of proper forest management planning in order to conserve and sustainably utilize the remaining forest resources. The themes given importance in conservation and utilization of forest resources here are 'sustainability' and 'local participation'. The forest forms an indispensable part of life for local people, as the forest provides them not only with fuel wood or construction materials, but also non-timber products such as their food, forage and medicinal plants, such as 'karité' (used to produce edible oil, soap, cosmetics etc.) and 'nerè' (used to produce soubala paste).

It is a recent major trend that great emphasis is placed on the ownership and sustainability of a project, and on the importance of the participatory approach. These are all very important factors, and during this survey I was made to think especially about the project 'ownership' of the beneficiaries and their relationship with the donor group. 'Local participation' requires not only the formality of local community's involvement in the project. What is crucial is the spontaneous attitude of the local people to assume an active role in the project. In Burkina Faso also I often heard about cases where things go well during the project implementation phase driven by the donor's initiative, but once the donor is gone a lot of problems arise regarding the project management and implementation. Although the project label might carry the word 'local participation', in fact the local people are just doing whatever they are told to do by the donor group, without any sense of ownership or personal initiative. It may probably be the donor group itself who, while insisting on 'initiative' or 'ownership' from the local community, actually deprives them of such forms of involvement for the sake of their own convenience.

It might have something to do with the nature of the Burkinas, but here also people tend to assume the passive, 'whatever-you-say' attitude to any suggestions from us, as it is good enough to receive any sort of development aid whatsoever. I felt that the problem behind this attitude of theirs might be the lack of 'reserve' or 'foresightedness', resulting from poverty. For instance, take the example of shopkeepers selling souvenirs to foreigners in the street. Prices are always negotiated. If I say, "That is too expensive," the initial price of CFAF 20,000 immediately drops down to CFAF 10,000 or CFAF 5,000. It is natural that with foreigners they start with prices much higher than the actual value of the commodity. However, in my eyes the fact that their negotiating prices drop so easily seemed to suggest the extent of their poverty. That is, they want CFAF5,000 today rather than CFAF10,000 tomorrow. This mentality is true not only for souvenir sellers but also for villagers facing forest depletion. They are living their life on a day to day basis. Poverty results in a lack of preparedness for the future, and a lack of foresightedness. Everything seemed to me to originate from this. After bargaining with souvenir sellers in Burkina Faso, I was left with a bitter feeling that I never felt after similar bargaining in the Middle East. I even could not help but feel somehow sorrowful, or mournful, about the souvenir sellers of Burkina Faso, behind whose backs I felt their acute poverty. Still, smiles on the faces of village children were encouraging. I wish the very best for the future of the 'Upright People'.

(By Koto in Burkina Faso, May 2002)



'Karité' trees – an important source of income for local community



Souvenir seller in the capital Ouagadougou



May the future be bright for these children...