Dry-Season Agriculture in Burkina Faso


University of Illinois students in Burkina Faso.

Riding in the 90-plus-degree weather in Burkina Faso, breathing in sand from the not-so-developed road ending in a cotton field, was a drastic change of pace from my Christmas memories of driving in the unplowed, snowy roads of rural Southern Illinois, ending in a deserted cornfield. But perhaps spending the remainder of the winter break in Burkina would help our group understand the plight of agriculture in Africa—and around the world. We spent much of the trip to Burkina Faso visiting agricultural projects that actively engaged African farmers. Burkinabé farmers and individuals working for the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Plan, tried to grow crops in the dry season. Burkina's two seasons—rainy and dry—prevented farmers from growing certain crops year-round, such as cotton and maize, without the assistance of irrigation.

Yet, dry-season agriculture has the potential to be productive. If the Burkinabé farmers can grow crops well during the rainy season, assuredly with the right tools, they can grow during the dry season as well. In addition, these crops could improve the nutrition intake of the farmers' children, keeping them more alert in school and in other activities that may lead to better lives. Many NGOs brought our group to their ideal, best-looking projects that made huge differences in the communities that they served. Based on our observations of these NGO-funded projects, it seemed that the dream of dry-season agriculture did work, and people of these communities could enjoy the additional benefits.

Other experiences, however, quickly put my American naivety in check. On a visit to a mosque, the group saw a tragic government dam project. The dam broke when the rainy season came. Just as poor management and bad weather happen in developed countries, these factors definitely occur in Africa. One can only imagine the amount of CFAs (West-African currency) spent on this tragic project. In another village, only one farmer remained working on the dry-season agriculture project, and it was a mere garden. The NGO had done a poor job training the villagers on project maintenance, and, overtime, farmers deserted the project and the NGO had fled.

In general, NGOs and the government confront huge challenges in training the villagers to maintain the agricultural projects' profitability. At a government project that the group visited, the villagers begged for more money. Professor Akresh asked the villagers why the community was not charging farmers to use the pump and other tools that could make the project successful and be a source of financial capital when the tools broke down. The villagers responded that they had not considered this option or they did not think it was a good choice. In NGO project-funded villages, officials reminded the villagers that they would not be around after the project ended, and recommended what the village should do after they left. Based on my visits to the different villages, the huge task was not developing projects (that was easy) but training residents to make the most of the project, which was exhausting.

To be honest, these projects have a lot of potential to do good on a small scale, but something else is needed on a large scale to give Africans the ability to raise themselves out of poverty. Development economists have struggled to figure out what this "something else" is. The group asked the same question throughout the trip. This question still lingers in my mind. It provoked some research on my part in a project I did in the spring semester on cotton farmers in West Africa. But, again, there is not one solid answer. Maybe growth miracles are just that—miracles. Don't mention that to the millions of hard-working African farmers though, because they are the ones trying to make the miracles happen.


Visiting an NGO project.

—Christopher Paul Steiner
Undergraduate student, Department of Economics