Roots in the African Dust

Sustaining the Sub-Saharan Drylands

The image of Africa in the modern world has come to be shaped by perceptions of the drylands and their problems of poverty, drought, degradation and famine. Michael Mortimore offers an alternative and revisionist thesis, dismissing both on theoretical and empirical grounds the conventional view of runaway desertification, driven by population growth and inappropriate land use. In its place he suggests a more optimistic model of sustainable land use which is based on researched case studies from East and West Africa, where indigenous technological adaptation has put population growth and market opportunities to advantage. He also proposes a more appropriate set of policy priorities to support dryland peoples in their efforts to sustain land and livelihoods. The result is a remarkably clear synthesis of much of the best work that has emerged over the past decade, and a timely and useful study.

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In memory of Hawuwa, who died at Dagaceri on 22 September, 1995, aged three months. One among many denied a life, even in poverty

Blessed are you who are in need; the Kingdom of God is yours
Luke 6:20(REB)

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Preface

The title of this book is intended to communicate hope, which is the spiritual diet of farmers, and for none so much as those who live in the drylands. Smallholders are themselves like roots in the soil. They shoot in good times, but when times are hard, they search deeper (or wider) for the moisture and the nutrients they need to sustain themselves. They die back to the basics, and surprise us with their resilience when the rain returns. Small farmers and livestock producers are the roots of African economies, and the basis for their development.

For too long it has been the convention either to dismiss smallholders as anachronistic survivors, certain to disappear in the rush to modernisation, or as quite malignant in their treatment of the African environment. This condescension, as is now recognised, was more a product of ignorance than any rational understanding. Only now, when so many foreign transplants have wilted or died in the hard earth of Africa, is the value of indigenous resources openly acknowledged. Given an enabling policy environment and unobstructed access to new ideas or markets, the resources of dryland communities can be mobilised in sustainable systems for managing natural resources.

The evidence for these assertions is found in a heterogeneous corpus of field-based studies whose published reports are widely distributed. I am more aware than any of my readers that I have been selective in choosing material for this study; and furthermore, my selectivity is the result of ignorance as well as design. Those whose work is not used must forgive me for trying to build a coherent case on what I know best, recognising that other selections might either strengthen, or bring into question, my arguments. However I believe that the multiplication of unco-ordinated, and sometimes duplicative, parallel case studies has gone far enough. There seems to me to be a need for research and debate driven by the search for a unifying theory of environmental management in drylands, encompassing their natural and human resources. I would like to think that if this root, which I am trying to nurture, perishes in the dust, a stronger one will take its place.

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I am grateful for the institutional support and encouragement that has enabled me to pursue my interest in drylands research in Africa over many years: Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and Bayero University, Kano (both in Nigeria); and the Centre of West African Studies of the University of Birmingham, the Overseas Development Institute, and the Department of Geography at the University of Cambridge (in the United Kingdom), whose third year students of the Geography of Africa in 1993/94 suffered an earlier exposure to, and hopefully questioned, these ideas.

In tilling this soil I have learnt from so many people that it is impossible to mention them all. In their contributions to this project, as it grew from seed bed to flower garden, the following friends joined me: through wrestling with theory and design, Bill Adams, Michael Chisholm and Mary Tiffen; through shared labours in the field, Afolabi Falola, Francis Gichuki, Ahmed Ibrahim, Alhaji Chiroma, Aminu Shehu, Donald Thomas, Maharazu Yusuf, Salisu Mohammed; with tutorials on soil science, Frances Harris; with cartographic ornamentals, John Antwi; by commenting on the vista, Bill Adams, David Anderson, Frances Harris, Mary Tiffen and an anonymous referee; for killing many weeds and cheerily challenging my presuppositions, Beryl Turner.

To the villagers of dryland Africa it is impossible to compose a *gracias* adequate for the acceptance, willing co-operation, hospitality and above all, friendship with which I have always been blessed on my researches. Living on the margin of the global economy, Sahelians are notable exponents of courtesy.