

Distribution of Resources and Products in Mossi Households

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A recurrent theme throughout this volume is the multifaceted nature of development planning that is needed to improve the performance of African food systems. To increase the productivity of scarce resources obviously requires new technology, but development planning must consider more than just food production. This chapter addresses another essential dimension: the distribution of resources and products.

The increasingly numerous urban population depends almost entirely on imported food from rural food-producing areas or other countries. To people in cities and towns, children in boarding schools, workers in the mines, and many others, food distribution is a critical dimension of African food systems. Less obvious but equally important is the distribution of resources and products among people in rural food producing areas. Productive resources such as land, labor, livestock, cash, credit, skills, and information are never evenly distributed. Access to these resources is restricted, as is the access to food and other products that result from the management and employment of resources. Some resources and many products may be bought and sold for money, and the chain of monetary transactions ultimately resulting in food reaching the cities works largely through markets, traders, business people, and, sometimes, government marketing bureaucracies. In most rural areas of Africa, however, the majority of productive resources and most of the food eaten by farm families and their neighbors are acquired through non-monetary exchanges or as part of the set of transactions characterizing social life. That is, rural people enjoy access to and control over resources and products through their social, political, and economic relationships with other people.

Although this complex interweaving of relationships that affect production and consumption is known to development workers, there is a tendency to gloss over the importance of the control over distribution that is exercised by the basic social units that produce (and consume) food. Development workers also tend to

technological innovations or government policies.

In recent years, however, there has been a growing concern with the use of a simple household concept to describe local units of production and consumption in African food systems (Guyer 1981, 1984; Jiggins 1984; Haugerud 1982; Koenig 1982; Spring 1984); more analysts are now convinced that the conventional economic model of the household as an autonomous unit of production and consumption with a single decisionmaking locus does not apply in most parts of Africa. This complexity of African households has not gone unrecognized in the major methodological discussions of research on African agriculture. In the farming systems literature (see Poats and Fresco in this volume), a great deal of attention is now being focused on intrahousehold production and consumption patterns, particularly that women usually have some command over certain resources and make decisions on their own initiative. Nonmarket flows of labor and commodities that relate or unite households are also attracting more consideration.

In spite of these theoretical shifts, there is still a tendency for field research, policy planning, and development project design to focus at the level of the aggregate household unit. To some extent this reflects the inevitable delay between theoretical change and policy/field implementation. Other important reasons for continuing to use the simple household concept are the practical difficulties involved in collecting and quantifying information on intrahousehold labor and commodity flows (Crawford 1982). Jane Guyer noted that "almost every survey contains somewhere, in the foreword, footnotes, an appendix, the problem of defining household membership and maintaining continuous records on people with . . . high mobility rates" (1981:98).

The vast majority of the data on intrahousehold and interhousehold groupings and distribution come from intensive field research that combines quantitative and qualitative, structured and unstructured techniques, often with small samples. The following case study from Burkina Faso, an example of this intensive field research, illustrates the importance of distribution patterns in influencing production and consumption and the inadequacy of a simple household concept that assumes a central decisionmaking locus. If only that simple concept is used, important data are not collected and analyzed including the following specific areas that are easily overlooked: (1) the semiautonomous rights and obligations of different sub-household groups, (2) how goods and labor are distributed across household frontiers, and (3) variation in the size and composition of household units over the life cycle and in response to specific types of technological innovations and outside influences.

**• INTRAHOUSEHOLD ORGANIZATION OF FOOD PRODUCTION,
CONSUMPTION, AND DISTRIBUTION IN THE CENTRAL MOSSI
PLATEAU •**

Given this working definition of the household—a group in which members live in the same place and share their meals—then most households in the home village may be described as overlapping units of production and consumption that share a residence and work certain fields collectively, or rely on the harvest of these cooperatively worked fields, or both, for most basic food needs.

Distribution of Land

Land that is farmed by a particular household group in the home village is acquired through a combination of inherited, customary, and borrowed rights. Inherited fields are referred to as *mam pasago* or *mam solem* (“my right”); these are clan fields that have become identified with a particular household through inheritance from father to son. Other tracts of clan land cannot be inherited and are described as lands of customary right. These are associated with certain kinship and political offices such as elder of the clan or chief of the village. Land that has come to be associated with different households through inheritance and customary right may be redistributed to people outside the household through a system of institutionalized borrowing. If a household member has proprietorship over fields that are not being cultivated by anyone in the household, then any member of the proprietor’s extended family may ask to farm a portion of the “surplus” land. This type of reallocation takes the form of a loan: the proprietor retains permanent rights to the land and the borrower obtains temporary rights of usage. No rent money is paid nor is any interest charged. Although first priority in the granting of a land loan is usually given to members of the extended family or clan, a loan may be made to someone outside the patrilineal kinship group, usually loaning to someone who is related through marriage or personal friendship. Approximately 19 percent of the total land area planted in the home village in 1979 was acquired through inherited right, 25 percent through customary right, and 56 percent through borrowing³ (see Figure 17.1).

Cooperative and Private Fields

The total area of borrowed, customary, and inherited land that a household cultivates is subdivided into cooperatively and privately worked fields. Cooperatively worked fields are cultivated by the entire household. The head of household dictates what crops are to be cultivated on these fields, timing of operations, and use of the products. For example, grain produced on cooperatively worked fields is usually allocated to feed the household for most of the year. Any monetary income

FIGURE 17.1. Land Tenure in Home Village, 1979—Percentage of Land Acquired for Cultivation Using Various Rights

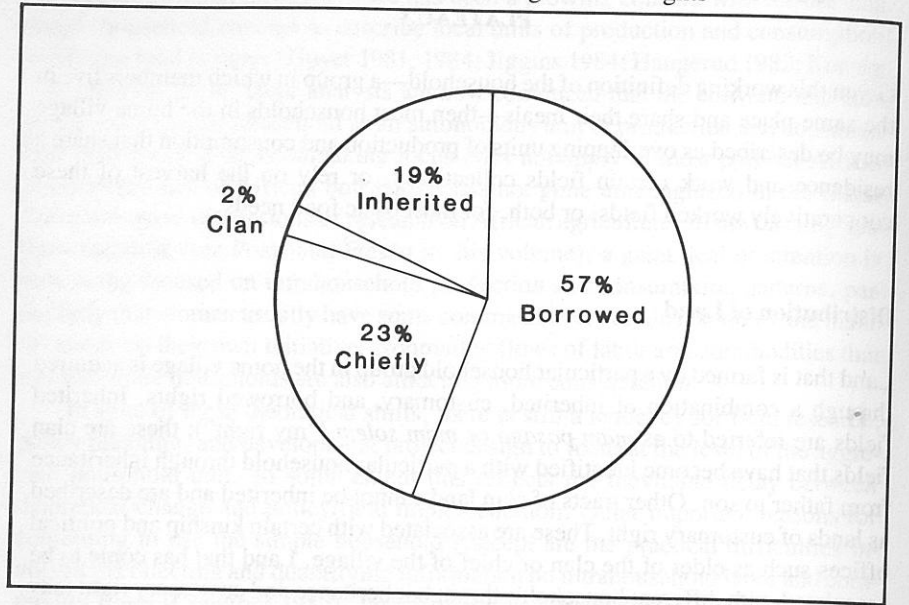
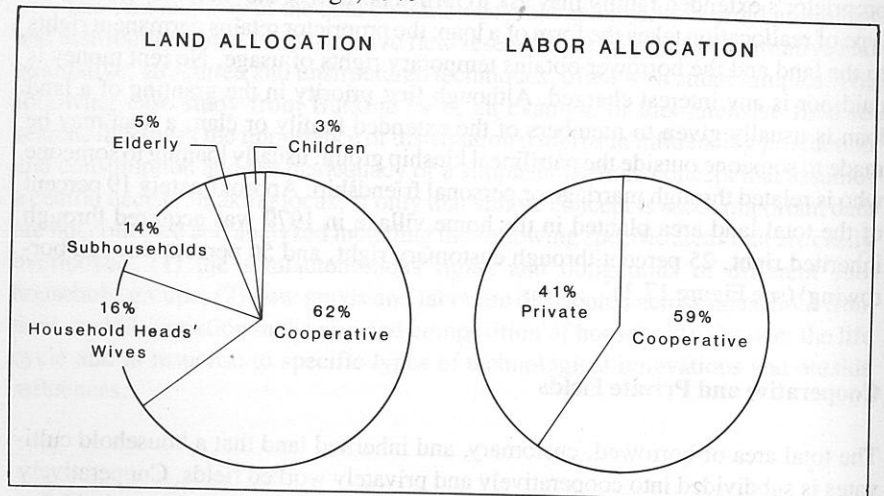
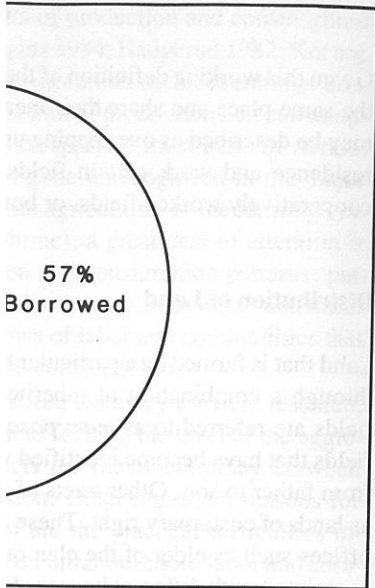


FIGURE 17.2. Land Allocation to Various Groups and Individuals and Labor Allocation to Cooperative and Private Fields in Home Village, 1979

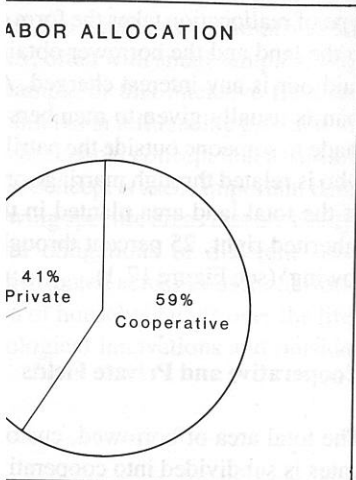


from the sale of food or cash crops from the cooperatively worked fields is controlled by the male or female household head.

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All individuals in a household have the right to cultivate a certain amount of land for their own personal needs. Wives have the right to farm at least one plot of food grain, one or two plots of peanuts (groundnuts) or ground peas, and at least one vegetable patch. Unmarried children usually farm one parcel of grain or a cash crop such as peanuts or cotton. Subhousehold groups are composed of married sons or brothers and their families, and these groups also farm a certain amount of food and cash crops apart from the main cooperative fields. Any crops or money income produced on a private field are under the private control of the person responsible for its cultivation, and these crops are stored separately.

Approximately 62 percent of the land planted in 1979 in the home village was farmed cooperatively. The 38 percent privately farmed was subdivided as follows: an estimated 16 percent by the wives affiliated with the household, 3 percent by unmarried children, 14 percent by subhousehold family groups led by married sons or brothers, and 5 percent by elderly men and women who hardly participate in cooperative work activities (see Figure 17.2)⁴. Labor allocation patterns between cooperative and private fields are roughly equivalent to land allocation patterns. Of total hours spent working in agriculture, 59 percent was spent on cooperative fields (62 percent of cultivated land) and 41 percent on private fields (38 percent of cultivated land).

Each year the household head determines where the members of his family are allowed to plant their private parcels of specific crops. Certain times are specified for individuals and subhousehold groups to cultivate their private fields, usually an hour or two in the early morning before going to the cooperative fields and an hour or two in the late afternoon before returning home. Occasionally a household head may designate one or two days after the main cooperative fields are planted for planting private fields. The amount of time an individual allocates to the cultivation of cooperatively versus privately worked fields varies enormously over the person's life cycle in response to a variety of factors including the total size of the household and the individual's relationships. The amount of time a married woman devotes to her private production activities is related to her childbearing responsibilities, age, health, as well as the number, sex, and age of her older resident children. Her position is also affected by the presence and relative status of any co-wives and whether or not she retains any rights to the inherited fields of a deceased husband.

Subhousehold Groups

While a married son or brother, his wife or wives, and their children collectively cultivate the private fields controlled by that man, he may still owe a major portion of his and his subhousehold's labor to the household's cooperatively worked fields. These private subhousehold holdings change location less frequently than do other private fields and represent the first stage of the son or brother becoming the pro-

prietor of a portion of the household's inherited land. The ideal for most Mossi families is to form as large a household as possible, but in practice it is difficult to acquire enough land to satisfy the cooperative and private needs of large households and to achieve an equitable distribution of household land through inheritance and subdivided cultivation rights. As a man's sons marry and start families of their own, the sons slowly increase the size of their private holdings and the amount of time devoted to them. Although the father gradually increases his household's access to clan and lineage lands as he becomes older, these increases do not usually keep up with the growing size of his household. Over time there is inevitably less inherited land per person, and one of the sons receives less than an even share.

The individual who receives less may acquire additional land through alternative patterns of residency and work such as borrowing land from other households, affiliation with the mother's patrilineage in a neighboring village, resettling some portion of the household in a less-populated area, or plantation wage labor in the adjacent country of Ivory Coast. At times a man who left the village returns once he has access to larger holdings at home. This new access may occur because of a death in the family or as a result of the emigration of other household members. A change in individual status such as a man's succession to the office of clan elder or village chief, positions with entitlements to customary right fields, might also influence a decision to return.

Land needs may increase in the early stages of the growth cycle of a household and decrease in the later stages. As a father ages he has fewer dependent children and thus needs fewer fields under his direct supervision. At the same time, the eldest son usually expands the size of the private fields cultivated by his own subhousehold until he supervises work on the cooperative fields and until the father and the father's wives are incorporated as semiautonomous production and consumption subunits within the son's household. When a father dies, his sons usually split the inherited fields and granaries and cease to farm the same cooperative fields, although they usually continue to live in the same residential compound. The brothers' households may continue to help one another during peak labor periods and through lending equipment. It must be emphasized that subdivision and composition of household and subhousehold units are quite fluid—households may split, and they may unite in response to the death of a family member, a new crop package, immigration, illness, or other factors affecting family needs and goals.

Distribution of Production and Income

The division of cultivated land into cooperative and private fields is associated with choices regarding which crops and varieties to plant in which fields. Sorghum and millet are the only important crops that are evenly distributed in both kinds of

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fields: 38 percent of cultivated land is in private fields, and approximately 40 per-
cent of the land devoted to sorghum and millet is in private fields. Cotton and corn
(maize) are less commonly planted in private fields than in cooperative fields—
only 26 and 14 percent respectively of each crop is grown in private fields. Rice,
peanuts, and vegetables are disproportionately common in private fields—51, 74,
and 91 percent respectively of each crop is grown in private fields. More rapid
maturing (short term) crops and varieties tend to be found in private fields since
these fields are generally planted later than the cooperative ones. This factor is ex-
tremely important in determining crop rotations and the geographical relationship
of fields. For example, the wives' private fields tend to be planted in areas
alongside the cooperatively worked fields in order to reduce the amount of time
involved in commuting from one field to the other. The use of new technology such
as animal traction and fertilizer tends to be more extensive on the cooperative fields
supervised by male household heads because they are the focus of most govern-
ment extension programs. Crops and monetary income produced from cultivating
private fields give individuals and subhousehold groups a certain amount of au-
tonomy from the household head. Some food may be stored for later use. For exam-
ple, during the time of year when the man or woman supervising the cooperatively
worked fields reduces rations to one meal a day, many wives use the grain from
their private stores to provide an extra meal each day for their children. The cash
income that a woman earns from the sale of privately grown peanuts, groundpeas,
sesame, cotton, and dried vegetables is used to meet her own needs and the needs
of her children, including childrens' school fees and supplies when these are not
paid by the husband. In addition, it is the wife's responsibility to provide basic
condiments such as spices, meat, and fish for the daily sauces that flavor the sor-
ghum porridge. Under the best of circumstances, a woman is able to invest her
money by purchasing livestock with cash earned from selling her privately pro-
duced crops and from nonagricultural activities such as spinning and petty trade.
In fact, very few village women have sufficient income to do so on their own. Al-
most all purchases of small livestock are made with cash gifts from returning labor
migrants or from gifts a woman receives when she is married. In contrast, food and
cash crops produced by unmarried sons and daughters on their private fields tend
to be sold in local markets immediately after harvest. The cash income they derive
is usually used for personal needs such as clothes, bicycle repairs, and petty trade.

Cotton and other cash crops produced on the cooperatively worked fields are
sold immediately after harvest. Money from the sale is used to meet cash needs of
the family and of the household head. Preferably, food grains are not sold until
after the first weeding of the next crop when clear evidence of a good prospective
harvest reduces risks in selling extra grain; furthermore, at this time grain prices
are the highest due to grain shortages.⁵ Some of the poorer farmers with smaller
reserves sell small quantities of grain immediately after harvest in order to meet
specific cash needs. Grain has other uses as well: in exchange for hired labor, as
barter for other goods and services, as food to host people invited for weeding and

threshing and to host marriage and naming celebrations, and as part of the economic and social alliances that are associated with the exchange of wives between extended families.

• CHANGING PATTERNS IN A SETTLEMENT PROJECT •

A large number of people from the home village moved in 1975 to a new land settlement project, the Volta Valley Authority (AVV), in the south of Burkina Faso. There was little consideration of private cultivation rights in the original design of the project. In contrast to conditions in the settlers' home village, the project assumes that each household farms all fields cooperatively under the leadership of an adult male recognized as the official household head. This designated household head is considered to represent the entire household group in extension programs and in contractual dealings with the project for insurance, equipment purchases, credit, and sales. Although this concept of an autonomous household unit with a single decisionmaking locus was a fairly accurate reflection of intrahousehold production when the project started in 1975, the organization of production had changed by the fifth cropping season (1979).

During the early years of the project, settler households were small and were involved in the heavy work of clearing fields. There was little time or money for noncrop activities such as livestock and trade. By the fifth year, households had accumulated large stores of reserve grain, had earned much higher cash and total incomes than typically earned in the home village, and had paid off all or most of their initial debts to the project. Moreover, most households had increased substantially in household size due to the immigration of additional family members. In 1975 each household received a fixed amount of land to farm, ten or twenty hectares, but later, due to the increased household size, settlers increased the area planted in the food grain (sorghum), reduced the area planted in the cash crop (cotton), and invested time and money in noncrop activities such as livestock and trade. Most households by 1979 had established a small area of private fields for the wives and unmarried and married children. By 1983 the absolute acreage cultivated by each household was greater, although the relative proportions planted by each category of family member remained much the same as in 1979 (see Figure 17.3).⁶

To compensate women and other household members for loss of personal income due to reduced size of private fields, the designated male household head makes cash gifts to family members after selling the cooperatively produced cotton. Settlers have reinstated a system of private harvest gifts whereby the male household head gives twenty to thirty dried ears of corn to wives of close friends and allies in the project. During the harvest, a woman may receive 100 to 200 kilograms of such gift corn that she may use as she wishes. In contrast to the home village, almost all of the women's grain in the AVV is sold rather than used for

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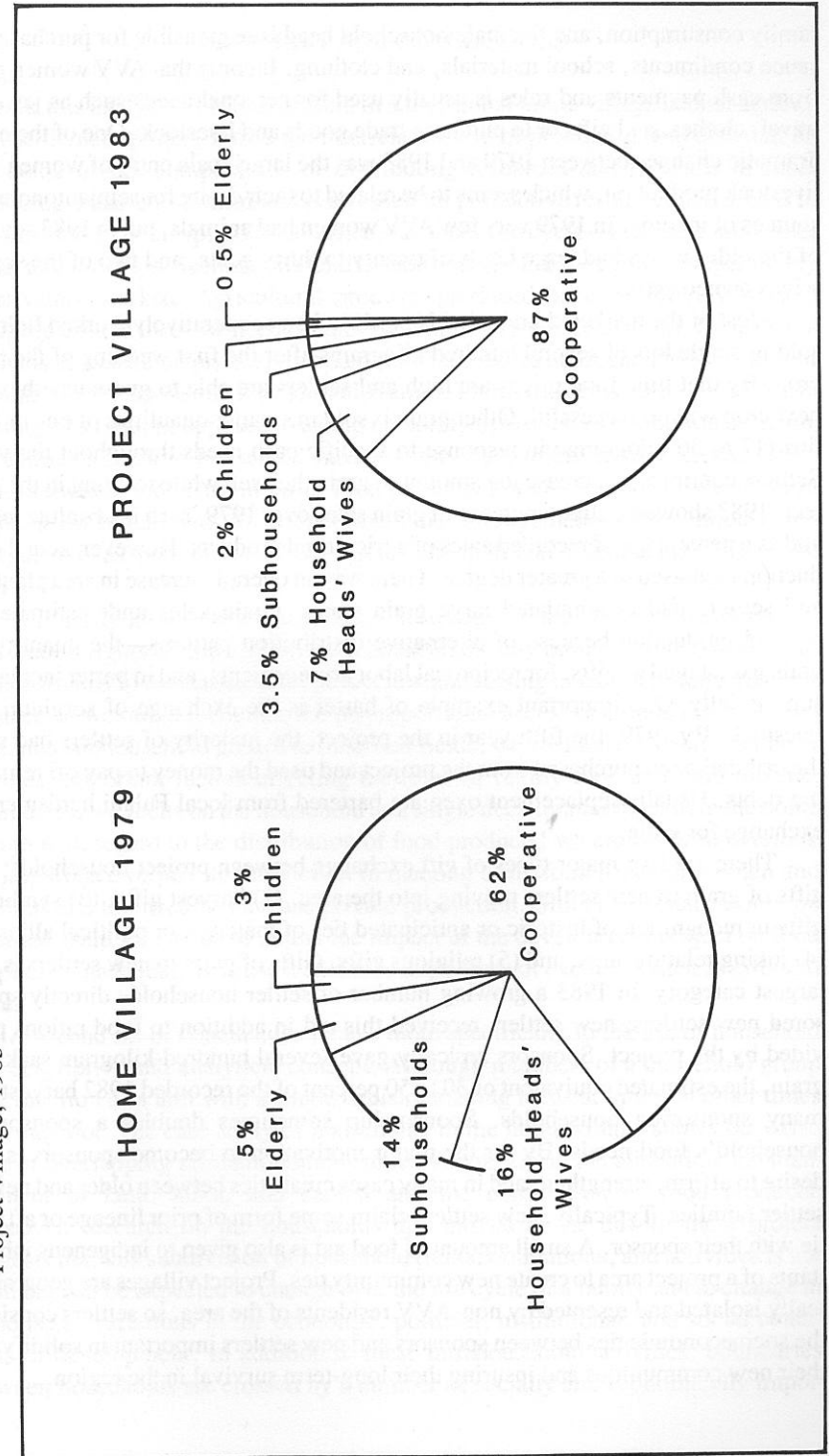
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FIGURE 17.3. Percentage of Land Cultivated by Various Groups and Individuals in Home Village, 1979, and in Project Village, 1983



family consumption, and the male household head is responsible for purchases of sauce condiments, school materials, and clothing. Income that AVV women earn from cash payments and sales is usually used for personal needs such as jewelry, travel, clothes, and gifts or to purchase trade goods and livestock. One of the most dramatic changes between 1979 and 1983 was the large-scale entry of women into livestock production, which seems to be related to their desire for semiautonomous sources of income. In 1979 very few AVV women had animals, but in 1983 several of the older wives had large herds of twenty to thirty goats, and two of the senior wives owned cattle.

Most of the marketed grain that is produced on cooperatively worked fields is sold in single lots of several hundred kilograms after the first weeding of the next crop. By that time food prices are high and settlers are able to guess whether the next crop will be successful. Other grain is sold in smaller quantities of one or two tins (17 to 36 kilograms) in response to specific cash needs throughout the year. Settlers continually increase the amount of grain they sell while residing in the project. 1983 showed a slight increase in grain sales over 1979, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of recorded sales of agricultural products. However, actual production increased to a greater degree. There was an overall increase in area planted, and settlers had accumulated large grain stores. Grain sales underestimate increased production because of alternative distribution patterns—the quantity of grain exchanged as gifts, for reciprocal labor arrangements, and in barter increased substantially. One important example of barter is the exchange of sorghum for livestock. By 1979, the fifth year in the project, the majority of settlers had sold the original oxen purchased from the project and used the money to pay off remaining debts. Usually replacement oxen are bartered from local Fulani herdsmen in exchange for grain.

There are five major types of gift exchange between project households: (1) gifts of grain to new settlers moving into the area, (2) harvest gifts, (3) symbolic gifts in recognition of historic or anticipated ties of marriage or political alliance, (4) joking relationships, and (5) religious gifts. Gifts of grain to new settlers is the largest category. In 1983 a growing number of settler households directly sponsored new settlers; new settlers received this aid in addition to food rations provided by the project. Sponsors typically gave several hundred-kilogram sacks of grain, the estimated equivalent of 30 to 50 percent of the recorded 1982 harvest for many sponsoring households. Sponsorship sometimes doubles a sponsoring household's food needs. By far the major motivation to become sponsors is the desire to affirm, strengthen, and in many cases create ties between older and newer settler families. Typically, new settlers claim some form of prior lineage or affinal tie with their sponsor. A small amount of food aid is also given to indigenous inhabitants of a project area to create new community ties. Project villages are geographically isolated and resented by non-AVV residents of the area, so settlers consider the socioeconomic ties between sponsors and new settlers important in solidifying their new communities and insuring their long-term survival in the region.

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• SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS •

In sum, this analysis of Mossi settlers in a traditional home village and an agricultural settlement project shows the interrelationship of production and distribution and some of the complexities of distributing resources and products in food-producing areas. First, farmland is an essential productive resource, and access to it is affected by kinship, political office, personal life cycles, marriage, and other social relationships. Second, this land is subdivided into fields either cooperatively or privately worked. Agricultural products produced on cooperatively worked fields are used to meet the needs of the entire family group. In contrast, agricultural products produced on privately worked fields are stored apart and under control of the individual responsible for their cultivation. Third, the decision to sell a certain quantity of a crop, as opposed to eating or storing it, is not the only option individuals within a farming household have for the disposition of food crops. Other choices include the distribution of food products through barter for livestock, in payment for hired labor, for cooperative labor arrangements with nonhousehold groups, and as part of the wider social and political relationships that unite families.

This study also shows that a failure to recognize the complex patterning of distribution rights within and between households may limit our understanding of the constraints to increasing food production and raising nutritional standards. For instance, if we fail to recognize the disproportional access of certain clans, household, and subhousehold groups to inherited fields, we are likely to overlook one of the most important factors affecting the level of family food and total income. Similarly, if we focus on the household as a single decisionmaking unit in the home village with regard to the distribution of food products, we are likely to overlook the importance of private production in meeting basic food needs of women and children and the need to increase private production. Similarly, reliance only on recorded grain sale totals to assess the impact of the development project on food supplies is inadequate because it excludes large areas of exchange such as gifts and barter.

A second set of conclusions relates more specifically to the use of household as a descriptive and analytical concept. Although members of a household group may function as a unit with a single decisionmaking locus at times, at other times they may not. The case study of households in the home village shows the existence of overlapping semiautonomous units with regard to the allocation and management of land, labor, and capital and the distribution of food products. Moreover, research on the households that moved to the development project suggests that this subdivision of household rights, obligations, and activities is not fixed but can be expected to change over the life cycle of a family and to change in response to variations in the economic, political, institutional, and social conditions of development. In addition to these intrahousehold activities, boundaries between households are crossed by a number of socially and economically impor-

tant nonmarket exchanges that unite household units, one example being food aid to new settlers and indigenous inhabitants of a project area to create new community ties.

This research points up a tremendous need for researchers and policymakers to consider the distribution of food products in the design of government programs and policies to increase production, reduce food losses, and raise nutritional standards. In particular, researchers and policymakers need to examine and understand the following:

1. The quantitative significance of independent production and consumption activities within households and the exchange of food products between households
2. Economic and social effects of independent food production activities for the internal organization of farm families
3. Economic and social consequences of nonmarketed exchange of food products between households
4. Patterns of interhousehold exchange for privately versus cooperatively produced products
5. The many ways these overlapping production and consumption units may affect distribution of adequate nutrition for specific subhousehold groups, design of new farm technology and extension programs to increase food production and distribution of adequate nutrition to rural households, and government policies and extension programs to direct the sale of marketed foodstuffs.

• NOTES •

1. The Mossi ethnic group constitutes approximately half the population of Burkina Faso. In precolonial times the Mossi lived in a number of related kingdoms and subkingdoms that formed a major cultural, economic, and political force in the Sahelian area.

2. The research (April 1978 to April 1980) on which the present study is based was part of a four country survey of Sahelian farming systems funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the Department of Agricultural Economics at Purdue University (AFR-C-1247 and AFR-C-1258). Trained enumerators gathered information on crop and noncrop production activities and income in the AVV village and the traditional home village. The two sites are separated by 120 kilometers, 200 kilometers by main roads. A short, two-month restudy of the settlers was conducted during the summer of 1983 through a Technical Assistance Grant from the South-East Consortium for International Development (SECID), Center for Women in Development.

3. Figure 17.1 is based on the percentage of total area planted in 1979 for fifteen defined household units that were included in the survey of the home village. Two other villages in the area of the home village were included in the survey but are not discussed here.

4. Land figures are based on the percentage of total area planted in 1979 for the fif-

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4. Patterns of interhousehold exchange for privately versus cooperatively produced products
5. The many ways these overlapping production and consumption units may affect distribution of adequate nutrition for specific subhousehold groups, design of new farm technology and extension programs to increase food production and distribution of adequate nutrition to rural households, and government policies and extension programs to direct the sale of marketed foodstuffs.

• NOTES •

1. The Mossi ethnic group constitutes approximately half the population of Burkina Faso. In precolonial times the Mossi lived in a number of related kingdoms and subkingdoms that formed a major cultural, economic, and political force in the Sahelian area.

2. The research (April 1978 to April 1980) on which the present study is based was part of a four country survey of Sahelian farming systems funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the Department of Agricultural Economics at Purdue University (AFR-C-1247 and AFR-C-1258). Trained enumerators gathered information on crop and noncrop production activities and income in the AVV village and the traditional home village. The two sites are separated by 120 kilometers, 200 kilometers by main roads. A short, two-month restudy of the settlers was conducted during the summer of 1983 through a Technical Assistance Grant from the South-East Consortium for International Development (SECID), Center for Women in Development.

3. Figure 17.1 is based on the percentage of total area planted in 1979 for fifteen defined household units that were included in the survey of the home village. Two other villages in the area of the home village were included in the survey but are not discussed here.

4. Land figures are based on the percentage of total area planted in 1979 for the fif-

teen sampled households in the home village. Labor figures are based on total recorded labor hours for these fifteen households.

5. For a more comprehensive examination of grain marketing behavior in a grain surplus region of Burkina Faso see Jackie Sherman (1984).

6. The 1983 figures are based on the percentage of total area planted for the ten households in the project village that were surveyed in both 1979 and 1983.

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