

UPLIFTING HUMAN DIGNITY IN WEST AFRICA



by Dada Rudreshvarananda

“Africa is 200 years behind the rest of the world. So our workers will have to work 10 times harder in Africa for 20 years in order for them to catch up with the rest.”

Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, as told to Ananda Marga workers in 1985.

In 1984, I was working in Africa with the Ananda Marga Universal Relief Team (AMURT). As a result of my experiences, I developed an intense desire to do some concrete service that would benefit humanity. I began to feel deeply that human life on this earth was so valuable. Internally I asked Baba for an opportunity to serve.

A HOSPITAL FOR THE POOR

I went to Burkina Faso in July 1985, where the government welcomed our organization. Dada Vishvarupananda, the Global AMURT Coordinator, joined me with Dr. Bharat Roberts and Dr. Ram Shettigar from the US. The director of health in the northern Sahel desert region suggested that a hospital was needed in the town of Deou, which had a population of 6,000. We drove there and met with the people, who are all Muslim in that region. They urged us to build a hospital, as well as a dam and a proper road connecting the town to the rest of the country.

We ran out of gas while returning at night and had to walk for three hours in the rain to reach the next village. The next morning the doctors held an impromptu medical

camp for the villagers until another car came to get us. They were so needy that we all felt that it was the right place for me to work. We chose to focus on the county of Deou and its 12 villages, each of which had about 500 people, so the total population was 12,000. While waiting for other grant money, Dr. Bharat started to send me \$1000 every month.

Dada Vishvarupananda negotiated a long-term funding agreement with the Australian government's international development agency (AIDAB). In May 1986 I signed the Non-government Organization (NGO) agreement contract with the government of Burkina Faso as the project director. I returned to Deou in July with a "moped" (a small motor scooter) and rented a hut with a sand floor and flat thatch roof. As a first step, I organized a meeting of all the dignitaries of the village. The Islamic leaders, the imam, also came. I told them, "I have not come here to start a new religion. I have come here to help you fulfill your needs." They appreciated that and said for a long time they had wanted a hospital in their county. Three months later I was able to bring in the first truckload of building materials and the work began.

The Imam of Deou was very honest, and I believe that one of the main reasons that the people supported our project over the years was because of him. Africans like to observe people, and they often understand the true nature of people, whether good or bad, through observation. Some of the imams even said publicly, "Dada was sent to us by God."

The people of Deou donated a piece of land and I built a residential compound with two houses. These had mud walls one and a half feet thick (45 cm.) and cement plaster, and the roofs were of thick mud. Mud is an excellent insulator, so it was cool in the summer and warm in the winter. The third building was a storage shed made of concrete blocks, nine meters by nine meters.

We constructed four buildings in the AMURT hospital complex over four years: the clinic, the doctor's residence, a large meeting hall, and finally an in-patient wing with 4 rooms of 6 beds each.

EXPERIENCING VILLAGE LIFE

For six months I had been regularly visiting the different villages of the county, trying to find the right place to start agricultural development. The people in the small village of Boulekessi were very friendly and hospitable, though extremely poor. They came to trust me and gave me a round hut with a straw pointed roof to live in that had belonged to an old man who died. There was a traditional African bed made of uneven sticks that was extremely uncomfortable! A translator lived there with me. Every night the villagers would come to my hut with a very big wooden bowl filled with hard millet porridge called "tho", and a small bowl of sauce made from either dried okra or baobab leaves. They ate the same food every day of the

year, and whenever their money ran out, they ate it without salt.

I asked them to wash their hands before we shared the food and not to spit in my hut, and they agreed. We all sat on the earth floor and ate with our hands from the same bowl. They believe the earth is a purifying element that absorbs all impurities. They slowly taught me words in Peulh and told me their history.

One hundred years ago the people of Boulekessi had lived in the south of the country. Then Peulh tribal warriors surrounded their village and forcibly removed them from their homeland and enslaved them. Gradually the people forgot their religion, language, culture and dress and acquired the culture and language of their Peulh masters. Though the Revolution of 1983 freed all slaves and decreed that whoever cultivates the land owns it, they still pay their “masters” with a part of their harvest every year. Sadly, slavery still exists in many other parts of Africa, too. One positive effect of my work in this region is that people began to demand payment for labor they used to feel obligated to do for free. On one occasion when a Peulh master asked men to dig a well for him, nobody agreed to do it without pay; he was forced to pay them.

I reflected on several questions during the 12 years that I worked there. Why, for example, after thousands of years, had there been no improvement in their agriculture or architecture? Why did they do nothing to stop the heavy rains from washing away their topsoil, when even lining up small stones would hold the soil? Why did they eat the same food every day without trying to vary the dish or improve its taste with spices? Why did they have no sense of hygiene? Why, in Bobo Dioulasso, the second largest city of the country, did men wearing tribal masks perform human sacrifices twice a year in the center of the city? No one was allowed to witness it, but they murdered an innocent person to have good rains and a good harvest. Why did they follow the dogma that they should not do what their ancestors never did? Why was there such a strong will to resist improvements in their way of life?

Four hundred old widows had been driven from their villages because they were accused of practicing witchcraft. They were living in a home in Ouagadougou, the capital. We visited them sometimes and constructed an irrigation system for their garden. In the village of Gandafabou we had a millet field, so I brought the harvest to Deou and regularly gave it away to those poor older lonely women.

And yet, there is much that can be learned from the people of Africa. They have a profound respect for nature and learn much from it. Once when a small girl I knew came alone to our food bank to ask for food, I asked about her grandmother and learned that she was sick. I accompanied the little girl to her hut and discovered that the old woman had a serious problem with her legs. So I sent my driver to the hut of a natural healer 10 kilometers away. When he arrived there, the old woman healer was waiting for him. She said, “I had a dream last night that a car would come here to take me to a patient with leg problems. So I prepared the necessary medicines. I’m

ready to go.” When they got there, she took off her slippers before entering the hut. With much respect for the old patient and for Nature, she taught the little girl how to boil the plants, and the patient recovered. Then I realized that I can learn something from that woman.

Why do the people of Africa think so differently from Westerners? When I visited the Stone Age cave paintings in Lascaut, France, I grasped one reason. Those ancient drawings were extremely beautiful and colorful. It was amazing how the primitive artists had painted in harmony with the walls of the caves. The people of Africa, like other traditional people around the world, say, “The land does not belong to us, we belong to the land. We belong to Nature.” Nature teaches them many things through their dreams. Their main concern is to live in harmony with Nature. The Western intellectual concept that Nature belongs to us is the cause of ecological destruction. I feel that Shrii Shrii Anandamurti came to launch a new era, extending this traditional perspective by teaching people to think, “We belong to God.”

AWAKENING A DESIRE FOR CHANGE

Each night when the villagers came to my hut, we spoke about what they wanted. They said they wanted to grow vegetables but they needed water to irrigate. They knew there was water underground, in some places only a couple of meters deep. Their problem was how to dig into the earth and get to the water.

There in Boulekessi, and later in each village that we went to, we started a village association. I always asked the villagers to sit together and collectively decide what they wanted. I felt it was my challenge to try to provide the resources they needed to achieve those things.

At the end of 1987 we got our first vehicle, a Toyota four-wheel drive double cabin pickup, purchased for \$20,000 by AMURT in the US and Europe. The Lutheran World Relief (LWR) had a project 1000 kilometers away in Niger digging wells and growing vegetables, and they agreed to a visit by a group of our peasants.

I asked two of the village associations to choose representatives for this long trip, and five came. When we reached the project, the local administration introduced us to a group of peasants who had their own wells and were growing and selling onions and earning money. They sat together and I went for a walk. When I returned two hours later, the villagers were very happy and enthusiastic. I felt that my work was done. For the first time in their lives they had decided to address the economic problems of their villages. Their firm determination was the driving force of the whole project.

The LWR agreed to fund our project of wells and in February 1988 they sent a trainer to Boulekessi and dug the first well. We chose to dig it in the compound of Bilali, the oldest man in the village. Before that, he thought he was going to die soon.

But the water was so good that he got new strength and energy to work in the garden, and 10 years later he was still alive. It was a kind of blessing for our project.

The wells were lined with concrete rings 1 meter 40 cm. in diameter. The depth varied between 3 to 12 meters. Two villagers trained to install the cement rings were paid salaries, and the rest of the laborers were paid the equivalent of a minimum salary in food supplies from the UN. We dug a total of 50 wells in the county. Unfortunately, after a few years the water level fell, so only some of the wells still have water.

In addition to helping the people utilize the underground water to grow vegetables, AMURT later arranged for a bulldozer to dig a large pond that was 4 meters deep and 75 meters in diameter that holds up to 20,000 cubic meters of water. We trained the villagers to plant trees and vegetables around it to conserve the water and protect it from animals, but after it was dug they lost interest in the planting. So there is water in the pond for just five months every year after the rains. Women collect water and cows also drink from there. Everyone was surprised when a crocodile more than a meter long also came to live there, because the nearest place with crocodiles was 60 kilometers away!

TREES IN THE DESERT

One of the causes of desertification in the Sahel is the loss of trees due to cutting for fuel and overgrazing by animals. After the success of our first “international tour” to Niger, I was able to inspire ten villages to send one representative each on our second long trip. We visited villages in both Niger and Burkina Faso that have planted “live fences” around their gardens with *prosopis juliflora* trees. These are thorny, fast-growing trees that need little water. They serve as a windbreaker, protecting both the plants and the topsoil. Again I left my villagers alone with the local people, and they saw first-hand how branches can also be cut for firewood without killing these trees. On that same trip, I drove them to the south of Burkina Faso to see a forest. None of the villagers had ever before seen a forest in their lives, and it made a deep impression on them.

In 1989 AMURT started a nursery with the government in Deou that produced 30,000 trees per year. Later the government took it over and we started a second nursery in the village of Gandafabou that produced 8,000-10,000 seedlings every year. We trained two people in each village to teach others how to grow and care for the trees. AMURT planted a total of 100,000 trees in the region. Some villages became very successful in growing and protecting trees. For example, Gandafabou is built on a sand dune. When I first went there, you could see the village from the bottom of the dune. Today, you can no longer see the houses from there, because the area is full of trees. They have the best harvest every year, too.

COOPERATIVE FOOD BANKS TO STOP POVERTY AND EXPLOITATION

The villagers of Burkina Faso practice a very traditional form of agriculture. After the first shower of the rainy season, the men plant millet (a cereal) or sorghum in the fields. The father makes a hole with a hoe, the eldest son follows behind him and plants a seed in each hole, and the youngest son buries the seed with his foot.

Unfortunately, rain falls in the Sahel less and less. The people have, on average, a good harvest only every third year. Due to erosion, the arable land is diminishing, while at the same time, the village population is increasing due to better health. This critical poverty is worsened by the greediness of the merchants. If a family's supply of millet for the year runs out before harvest, they have to buy or borrow food from the merchants at exorbitant prices. For every bag of grain they take on credit, they will have to repay two bags after the harvest, in effect at 100 percent interest for a few months. With their harvest income they also buy chickens, sheep and cows, and these animals are also a type of insurance, so when they have special expenses, they can sell an animal. But they buy the animals at the end of the rainy season when the animals are fat. When their millet runs out in March or April, they start selling animals (now very thin) to buy their millet, often at one third less than what they paid for them. Each year, history repeats itself. It is a vicious cycle of poverty.

So in discussion with each village association, we decided to construct a warehouse to store grain that they would run as a cooperative. These cereal banks would buy grain from the farmers at harvest time at higher than the market value, store it safely so the village would always have an emergency supply of food, and also sell it later in the year at cheaper than the market value. In this way, both the farmers and the cooperative gained.

We constructed a total of 14 cooperative food banks, training villagers to manage the storage, accounts and selling. In 1991, AMURT signed a contract with a local development agency to receive 80 tons of sorghum (a cereal) for our cooperatives. That year the country was suffering from a terrible famine. When the rains started, not a bag of millet was available in the area. The sorghum was delivered to a little town 50 km. south of Deou, so I rented a 4-wheel-drive truck from the army to carry the food. After two trips carrying 10 tons each, the truck broke down due to the horrible condition of the trails in that area. I hired another 4-wheel-drive Mercedes truck, but after two trips it also broke down. Finally I drove our own little pickup truck back and forth, carrying two tons of food each trip.

The grain from the food banks saved people's lives during the famine, and they realized the necessity of storing emergency supplies in every village.

DANGEROUS JEALOUSY

In Gandafabou, we helped the family of the village chief to dig the first well in his garden, we paid his sons to train and then dig the other wells, and we built a cereal bank near his house. His father, who was very old, had founded the village, and he liked us and had donated two pieces of land to AMURT. When we started the nursery project there a year later, I felt it was time to help other families, too, I hired someone from another family at \$100 a month, the minimum salary in Burkina Faso. This created a strong jealousy in the chief's family and split the village. The chief, out of anger, took back the big piece of land he had donated.

When I called a meeting to try to resolve this conflict, everyone came with his weapons: knives, sticks and spears. In that tense atmosphere, I quietly went to each man and asked him to give me his weapon. Out of friendship and respect for me, everyone surrendered his arms, which I placed in a pile in front of the eldest. After a long discussion, Biga, the leader of the other clan invited the chief's clan to end the feud and make peace. Biga and the chief stood up ready to shake hands. Suddenly the chief's old father stood up and shouted, "Never my son will be under Biga!" The chief stopped and absolutely refused to continue against the wishes of his father, so the effort at peacemaking failed. The deadly disease of jealousy had infected this chief. In the end, we built a second cereal bank for the other clan of the village.

LEARNING TO READ AND WRITE

Many of the village farmers were illiterate. When the cooperatives sold them tins of sorghum, they marked the number sold by drawing little stick figures of houses, one mark for each tin. The food banks created a need in the people to learn how to read and write and keep accounts. The village committees agreed to support this effort.

Thus a literacy campaign began in 1992. Everyone in that region speaks Peulh, whereas the other tribal languages are not known by all. So all associations agreed that the literacy classes should be in Peulh. We chose a Mossi whose name is "Number 1" to supervise the program, and he was a good example for the others because he was teaching a language that was not his mother tongue.

I did not want to bring teachers from outside the region, but rather wanted to create jobs for the village people. The village associations chose 10 men to be teachers. These men took training for 70 days, and then the next year they trained for another 50 days. After that they started teaching every winter for five years, starting in January and ending in late March. We gave the people millet to attend the classes every day. In some villages, 15-20 people attended, whereas in others only 10 people studied. I tried to start a cultural movement and we printed two issues of a newspaper in the Peulh language for the whole region, but we were not able to make it self-sustaining.

THE CRISIS OF EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP IN WEST AFRICA

The educational system in Africa often does not serve the needs of the people in the villages. There are primary schools in most villages, and the law states that all children must attend. The teaching is all done in French. For the students from Deou to attend high school, they have to travel up to 75 kilometers away to the main city of the province. If they graduate, they then have to go 400 kilometers away to the capital of the country to attend university. They learn a profession, but the only jobs available for university graduates are in the capital. So almost no graduates return to the village or contribute to its development. If they are successful, some will send some money home to their relatives.

There are a few millionaires in Burkina Faso, and even some very wealthy people live in Deou. However, money sent to the villages often causes conflicts. Some village elders become so jealous of a house that is better than theirs that they will do anything they can to destroy it. To avoid this, some relatives of those wealthy people bury their money in the ground, while their children remain naked and the wives are poor. So the present type of education is creating a big division between the different sections of society.

I feel that the intellectuals of each country have a responsibility to lead their people in the proper direction for the people's welfare. I have observed that when they do this, the village people, even the elders, will eventually follow and change.

BUILDING A ROAD TO THE WORLD

As their lives improved, the people started dreaming about a road connecting their village so that trucks could come and buy their vegetables. The nearest good road was 50 kilometers from Deou. In the rainy season, no trucks could drive over the trails because of the mud and water. One night I was carrying one and a half tons of cement and other materials for the hospital construction and our pickup truck got stuck in the mud twice. It took me 8 hours to cover those 50 kilometers. So I resolved that we had to do something about this problem if we wanted to continue our projects for these villages.

There were four places where vehicles got stuck in the mud. I brought some French engineers who surveyed these areas. They made a technical plan to fill three of these places with stones, and to build a concrete section over a stream at the fourth place.

The World Food Program of the UN gave us food with which to pay the villagers for their work on this project. We did the first of these road-building projects during June when the weather is very hot. We gave the families food to cook the night before and we ate at 5:00 AM and started work every day at 6:00 when it was cooler. The trench was 150 meters long and it took a month to fill it with stones. Because of the heat, the rocks we carried were burning.

Towards the end of the month, tension grew because the rains were about to come. Every day the peasants told me, "If it rains today, we can't work, we'll have to plant our fields." Sometimes it rained in another village, but not in their village. They were becoming desperately worried. Finally I declared, "The very day that you finish this work, the rain will come and you will have a very good harvest!" They felt very reassured by this promise of mine and began to work very hard. However I immediately regretted what I had said, and instead of them worrying, I began to worry! On the last day of the construction, I generously distributed the rest of the food and left. As soon as I left the village, a heavy rain fell and they had a bountiful harvest! So the people there believe that I am a witch doctor!

We did the same road work with three other villages that benefited the whole area. I personally worked beside them the first day or two, and after that I allowed the foreman to supervise them. I always gave them generous amounts of food for their work, more than they got elsewhere. When doing development work, I believe we should never be stingy or bargain too hard. That road to Deou is still in good condition.

CONFLICT WITH CORRUPTION AND ENVY

One of the tragic legacies of colonialism in Africa is widespread corruption amongst many government officials. For example, in one place a bridge is needed, but it has never been built even though international agencies have given the money for it to the government several times. The money gets siphoned off. When AMURT's development work began, we started to come into conflict with some of these corrupt officials.

People in Africa are very sensitive. Sometimes I unintentionally offended people, even without doing anything. For example, it is considered good manners to regularly visit all the local authorities. I neglected to pay regular visits to the gendarme, the local police, and they wrote a false complaint about me in 1991 and sent it to the head office of the northern region. The gendarme secretary there, who was the enemy of the one who wrote it, showed me the complaint and offered to tear it up. Apparently he wanted money from me for doing that. I said, "Leave it," not foreseeing how much trouble this would cause.

In October 1991 the director of central administration of NGOs asked me to meet her in Ouagadougou. She showed the complaint of the gendarme, and asked me to submit an evaluation of my entire five-year project. I wrote a big report with all details. When she received it, she said, "OK, we will come and inspect your project."

Meanwhile, I discovered that petrol was regularly disappearing from the project. When I confronted Amadou, the employee responsible, with the accounts, he admitted his fault and paid for the petrol he had taken.

Soon after that, I invited the presidents of each village association to come to Deou for a meeting in the hospital. Amadou came to that meeting, too, along with all the bad fellows of the village. I thought, "Something is wrong here." I announced, "These people are not supposed to be here, so the meeting will take place in my hut." I left, but instead of following me, the village leaders stayed behind and listened to Amadou's lies and complaints for two hours. He was really a clever politician. Then they went to the mayor, who called me and said, "These peasants have complained about your project, so we're going to close it."

I said, "I signed the contract with the national minister of finance, so only he can order me to close the project." He said, "OK, but for the time being you should stop your activities." I agreed. Then I drove to the capital. On the way I stopped at the village market of Goromgorom. There I saw one old man who was always very funny and friendly with me. He said, "Amadou woda," which means "Amadou is bad". Then I understood that Amadou, who was from the same tribe as he, was at the center of the plot to stop the project.

To try to solve this dispute, I went to see the high commissioner of the province. I told him my problem, and he promised that he would come and solve the problem personally in a few days. But when his car arrived, he was not there. Instead his deputy came with representatives from all the administration departments. They asked me to go to the mayor's house to meet them. There the other dada and I found ourselves facing Amadou and his friends along with these officials, and everyone was against us.

It was a trial. They said so many absurd lies against the project and me. It was not difficult to prove that all their accusations were false, because I had carefully kept all my accounts, obeyed all the government rules, filed all the required reports, and paid the social security and income tax of all the employees. They had no evidence against me.

After that, I sent a message to each of the 14 village associations and the three women's associations that I had started in the county. When all these representatives came together, I explained the problem to them. They wrote a petition in French stating that they supported the project because it was benefiting their villages. They demanded that the politicians stop harassing the project, and that the government support it. Finally everyone signed it with his or her thumbprint. This was the first time in their lives that these very poor people had ever asserted themselves in such a way to government officials.

Two respected tribal leaders, one Mossi and one Peulh, carried this petition to the mayor. The mayor in turn forwarded it to the high commissioner, who took it as a slap in his face. It was he who had secretly organized the trial against me. So he called all the peasants who had signed this document to come to the capital for a meeting. In that meeting he and his officers tried to intimidate them and convince them that the project should be closed. Courageously, the peasants refused to yield.

Finally the high commissioner said, “OK, if you don’t want us to close the project, at least we’ll kick the director out of the country.” Then he sent a telegram to the capital telling so many lies about me, claiming that I was a spy gathering intelligence on the weapons of the gendarme and the army.

I realized that I had to do something. So I met the president of a famous local NGO in another province and asked his advice. He arranged a meeting for me with the minister of the interior. When we met, I discovered that I knew him very well from the time when he used to work with another NGO. He was very happy to see me. After chatting about my work for 45 minutes (this is the polite African custom), he finished by saying, “Your problem? Don’t worry about it, I’ll squash it.”

Still the problem was not over. An inspection mission of the government and the NGOs had been expected for the last nine months. When they finally came, they first visited the high commissioner who repeated all the old lies. I drove them to see every village in the project. At the end they said, “OK, tomorrow we will hold a public meeting in Deou to hear all the accusations.” About 40 peasants came. When they were asked, “What do you think about the AMURT project?”, each one stood up, one after the other, and said how much it had benefited them. The project had given them training, jobs, wells, medical care, food and more. For the third time, the peasants had not been intimidated by the government officials and supported me.

I thought the matter would end there, but when the commission issued its report, they repeated the same old lies. Then I realized that I had to go to the highest level. I went to see Ganesh, a member of Ananda Marga who was very influential with all the national leaders. When he heard the whole story, he asked me for the names of the people who were spreading these lies against us. I gave him five names, including the head of the gendarme, the mayor and the high commissioner. Within fifteen days, all five had been transferred.

Another friend of Amadou was a very clever crook in Deou. He was known as Wan Yu because he loved to watch kung fu videos. He was responsible for collecting taxes from every vendor in the market, but during three or four years of this, he never handed over a penny to the government. He also led a gang that stole cattle from the people. According to the law, whenever a cow is found wandering unattended, the mayor would keep it until the owner paid a fine to get it back. But Wan Yu and his gang immediately sold all the stray cattle in the market and kept the money. He had a big network of influential friends, and he paid bribes to a lot of people, including the gendarme, the mayor and even a member of parliament. Three times the police arrested him, but every time his friend in parliament got him released.

Because of his friendship with Amadou, he started to try to instigate the peasants against me in certain villages. When I heard of this, I went immediately to meet an old friend, Dim Salifou Sawadogo, who was the leader of the majority political party in parliament. He was a very educated man, with a Masters Degree in History from the Sorbonne University in France. I told him about all of Wan Yu’s crimes and

complained about the deputy in parliament who was protecting him. As soon as I left, Sawadogo called that deputy and asked for an explanation. The deputy tried to deny everything, but it was clear to Sawadogo that the facts I had given were true. He demanded that Wan Yu repay the government all the money he had stolen over the years, several thousand dollars. The deputy returned to Deou, and forced Wan Yu to sell all his cows and pay it. Later Wan Yu and I became friends.

I learned from these experiences that no matter how great is the service work we do, it is essential to build our network of contacts and sympathizers. Later, when other clashes came, I immediately went to our influential supporters, and they helped me. I had learned how dangerous false accusations could be.

DESTRUCTIVE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Another interesting conflict took place in 1991. Each of the 14 cereal banks were to repay AMURT half of the sorghum they received (10 tons each) after one year, and the rest the second year. The first year every cereal bank kept its promise. But in 1992, Project Sahel Burkina, a huge bilateral program of the governments of Holland and Burkina Faso, came to the province. They had a budget of \$10 million, a hugely extravagant amount for that terribly impoverished region. They started distributing loans to all the peasants. The peasants, seeing so much money available, stopped paying.

The project organized many training courses and paid the peasants \$6 per day to learn modern techniques of agriculture and animal husbandry. In addition they paid the men \$8 a day for their transport. But the peasants just walked to and from the training classes and were handed a total of \$14 or more a day, when most of them had been earning only \$10 a month in the past. The majority did not change their way of farming, they just stopped working. This project was out of touch with the reality of the African villagers and the big money started corrupting the entire provincial population of 120,000 people!

So I went to see the Dutch director of the project. I had worked in those villages for five years before he arrived, yet he never asked to meet me and discuss his plans. He said, "Don't worry, we'll take care of everything." I went back a second and third time, but he merely tried to pacify me. He was an influential man and I represented a very small organization, so he did not consider me important.

Then I went to the Dutch Embassy in Ouagadougou, and asked to talk to the head of the service. He agreed to give me five minutes, but when he heard what was happening, he kept me for almost an hour. He couldn't believe how their project was breaking apart all the village associations. So he asked me to put my complaint in writing. I submitted a detailed two-page report which he forwarded to the project director with the note, "You have one week to show why your project should not be closed."

This triggered a huge clash in the whole province. The Burkina Faso director, who was actually administering the project, suddenly had a heart attack. When I returned to Deou, the project managers launched a personal attack against me and even included a political cartoon condemning me in their small newspaper.

Finally the finance minister called for a reconciliation meeting between the Dutch project director and I. The day before that meeting, the Dutch embassy chief met me and said, "Whatever you want, we'll give it to you." I replied that the project should stop giving loans and should stop distributing money freely. He agreed.

After four years, half the planned period of the project, an evaluation team came to the work. They reported that 80 percent of the project had failed. So the new project director had to resign. Still the terrible extravagance continued, because they then had to find other ways to spend their remaining \$5 million. They decided to make the village of Gandafabou into a tourist site, and so they built latrines on top of a beautiful natural sand dune, so that tourists could go there by camel and use the latrines at the top of the dune. Needless to say, no tourists ever showed up.

Before the arrival of this project, I had managed to get the three tribes of that area working together. The Bellas were the former slaves of the Touaregs, and they were still subservient to them. The AMURT literacy drive in the culturally-neutral Peulh language contributed to the independence of the Bellas and helped to unite everyone. But the Dutch were ignorant about these old historical and psychological conflicts, and they paid different literacy teachers to teach the Tamashek (Touareg), Mossi and Peulh languages. The man in charge of the project in Deou was a Peulh, and he always hired his tribesmen. The others complained bitterly and the old tribal divisions and antagonisms started anew.

This project was almost a total failure because they had a huge budget and didn't know how to spend the money wisely. They had to show results quickly, but village people in Africa don't change quickly. Most big development projects in the Third World fail, and often, as in this case, they actually harm smaller projects and organizations that are helping the people.

HEALTH FOR THE VILLAGERS

The medical system in Burkina Faso and Africa in general is mostly ineffective. One reason is a lack of education about the importance of hygiene. It is not uncommon to see a man pay a veterinarian to cure his cows and not spend money on his sick wife. Every morning when we used to go to work in one village, we stopped by the home of the village chief. His child had a huge abscess the size of a tennis ball on his cheek. We pressured him every day to take the child to the hospital, until finally he gave in and the abscess was removed. Another boy with a similar abscess waited so long to remove it that in the end he was left with a permanent hole in his cheek.

Two fellows who I knew very well died of gonorrhoea, which can be cured with only one pill. They were so ashamed of the disease on their genitals that they waited until it was too late.

Another reason for the failure of the medical system is that the people don't trust the staff of the hospitals. Often they are corrupt, they care little for the peasants, and they don't keep the facilities clean.

The old imam was my friend and supporter. He was sick for two months, burning with fever. I sent him to the hospital, but later he told me he was given an injection and two hours later he was sicker than before. So the following day I took him to the capital and arranged for his blood and urine analysis the same day. We discovered that the real diagnosis was a benign form of syphilis, and for a \$20 prescription he was cured.

One day the driver of my donkey cart was kicked in the face by the animal. The hospital staff merely cleaned the wound and sent him home. When his eye became infected, I drove him to the capital to see a specialist. Though the waiting room was full, the doctor was about to leave for the market. I insisted that she examine this patient, so she shone a light in his wounded eye and asked him if he could see any light. When he replied yes, she said it was OK and went to do her shopping. Unconvinced, I took the man to a French doctor I knew. He immediately operated. Afterwards he said, "If this patient had come to me immediately, I could have saved his eye. Now all I could do was save his other eye."

The government leaders are demanding money from the rich countries to fight the AIDS epidemic which is sweeping Africa. Sadly I watched several AIDS patients die in Deou. But in fact the intellectuals are not raising the consciousness of their people about this. I was shocked when I heard a medical student claim, "AIDS was invented by the white people — it doesn't exist!" Later I discovered that in fact many students and other intellectuals also believe that. The director of a company that was distributing condoms had to resign in a scandal because he tried to convince a student to have sex with him without a condom.

Dr. Bharat visited Burkina Faso again in 1996, and seeing the great need there, increased his monthly contribution to \$2000 per month. He also constructed a laboratory in the AMURT hospital and we trained a lab technician to do five analyses: blood, urine, stool, blood sugar and tuberculosis.

We then decided to train a health worker in every village to teach hygiene and give the basic medicines for the most common diseases. So each village elected one person who took training for one week, with further follow-up training every year. This program became very successful and did a lot to improve the health of the villagers.

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON BIRTH CONTROL

Fifty years ago, when a woman gave birth to ten children, sometimes only one survived. So men married several women to provide enough children for their future. Today nine children out of ten survive, yet Muslim men in Burkina Faso still marry more than one wife.

The capitalist countries complain that the African population is increasing, and that this growth must be stopped. In fact the population density is very small. The population is only 400 million on that huge continent of 30 million square kilometers, big enough for Europe, the United States and India to all fit inside. Africans consider their children the treasure of their nation. Men and women consider themselves happy and rich when they have children, hoping they will grow up to help them on the farm and in the kitchen. The more children a woman has, the higher is her status and respect. Moreover, women often receive more love and affection from their children than they do from their husbands.

African women tie their babies to their back and breastfeed them for two years or more; because of this, sons and daughters remain attached to their mothers for their whole life. I had a Peulh neighbor who was very honest and religious. He had two wives whom he loved sincerely. He never beat them or any of his children. His wives competed in having children, so if one had a child, the other one wanted one, too. When I left, both wives had seven children each, and he had fathered two other children from a previous marriage. One of the wives became a literacy drive teacher. She taught about contraception, but she did not practice it because she wanted more children.

When a child is born in the Peulh tribe, he or she gets a cow, and by the time of marriage, they take all the cows that were born of their original cow with them to start their new family. Women and men are economically independent. Women sell milk and ghee in the market, and they cook and weave mats for the roof. In the Peulh tribe, the house belongs to the woman. If she becomes fed up with her husband, she can kick him out.

Birth control is a very sensitive issue in Africa. It is a political, economic and cultural issue. If we can help the people to gradually raise their standard of living and level of education, women will naturally want to have less children.

A THREAT OF WAR

In 1994, the Touareg tribe was engaged in a struggle against the Mali government in an effort to win independence. This tribe was also fighting against the government of Niger, and they even claimed Oudalan Province of Burkina Faso as part of their territory. Rebel fighters began crossing the border regularly to buy petrol, and Touareg refugees began fleeing to Burkina Faso for safety. Their numbers increased

to 27,000 in Deou County alone.

At that time Project Sahel Burkina hired a Touareg literacy teacher who, unbeknownst to the Dutch, secretly worked for the rebels. He was trying to convince the Touaregs that the province should belong to them. Gradually the situation became more dangerous. The rebels began driving into Deou with all their weapons, and stole camels and several of the four-wheel-drive vehicles from the Dutch project. Sometimes they killed people during their robberies, yet the police did nothing. Once my driver was driving on a trail when a rebel came in front and threatened him with a grenade. He just ignored the soldier and drove past, and miraculously nothing happened.

After that, whenever I went out by car, I had to be accompanied by four heavily armed gendarme and soldiers on motorcycles. At any time the rebels might strike. So I went to see the second-in-command of the Burkina Faso Army, whom I had previously initiated. He was a quiet man and a good diplomat. When I told him how dangerous the area had become, he said, "I was not aware of the seriousness." He sent a detachment of soldiers and stationed them at the border, and that stopped the intrusions of the rebels. The UN began administering the refugee camps, and finally, after a peace treaty was signed in Mali, managed to repatriate the refugees to their homeland.

THE POWER OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

I was able to organize associations of women in three villages and we taught them how to grow vegetables to become economically independent. Later the Deou Women's Association asked me for a grinder to mill their cereal. I convinced the French Embassy to buy it for them for US\$10,000, and they chose to train and pay one man to operate it. The women successfully overcame many obstacles, and today that mill is grinding the millet of all the women in Deou.

The real success of our project was that men and women alike learned how to express themselves, how to express their needs, and how to fight for their dignity. We tried to create a union of village associations in the province that would combine to form an independent socio-economic unit. Just how effective we were becoming, and just how threatening this consciousness-raising was to the traditional rulers, can be seen in the candid words of the Burkina Faso deputy director of Project Sahel Burkina. After he lost his job, he told me that he was the one who had convinced the Dutch government to choose Deou County for their work. The real reason that he chose our area, and which he never revealed to his Dutch partners, was to stop AMURT's work! He was proud of this deceit.

Of course all the money that the Dutch government poured into our area for eight years was a setback for us, but it did not stop our grassroots organizing work. It just made us struggle harder.

A MASTER UNIT AS A MODEL OF INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT

In 1994 I started a Master Unit project in another province of Burkina Faso, 50 kilometers south of Ouagadougou. It was an interesting adventure that centered on our collaboration with the local people. The essential prerequisite was mutual trust. In the first village I visited, they gave us a piece of land near their dam and another near the river, a total of four hectares.

Five LFT volunteers from the capital went to work there. We purchased a water pump for the village irrigation and constructed a large mud house in the same style that I lived in, and each person had his own room. I gave them some money every month for their food and expenditure, but their goal was to become self-sufficient. The first year went very well, but then they became rather lazy. Ten brothers whom I initiated from that area came and replaced them and worked there for two years. One of them, Akhilesh, was very motivated. Every day he taught a yoga class 10 kilometers away in the town, and he also managed the small pharmacy we constructed where we sold both natural and allopathic medicines. He also started a literacy school for the peasants.

LESSONS FOR GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT WORK

I learned many things during my years working in Burkina Faso. First of all, I learned you must never get angry or lose your temper. If you do, the African people will never forget it. Keep some reserve inside when you meet an obstacle. If a project doesn't work in one village, you can try it again in another.

Respect the position and responsibility of all village leaders and government officers. Always be on time for appointments. In Africa, you have to be very polite and respectful. Shake hands, look the person in the eye, and ask, "How are you and your family?" Do this several times. Express your happiness at seeing him or her. Speak loudly and clearly and keep checking that your words are understood. Talk lightly about your project; if you have a problem, express that only at the end of your meeting. Africans take time with human relations.

Before visiting a village for the first time, find someone who knows the people there to introduce you. Go with that person to the village chief and listen to what he has to say. Then ask the village chief to organize a meeting of everyone. Ask them to discuss what they need. Facilitate their brainstorming, and later assist them in prioritizing their needs. At the end of the meeting, create a village association of everyone who is interested to solve the problem. Help them come up with what they themselves can do to solve the problem. Your role is to seek money from foundations to compliment their efforts. The people must actively participate in this process, for if you do everything yourself you will not give them the opportunity to grow and take responsibility for their communities.

We who come from other lands to Africa, bring with us our perspective and logic and believe that we are correct. But we often don't consider that the Africans have another perspective, and according to their logic they are right. This attitude causes many misunderstandings. We need to learn their logic and find out how to adjust with it; not vice versa. Give scope to others to express themselves; otherwise, you will hurt their ego and their dignity.

In 1989 Baba was addressing an AMURT meeting. At the end He asked if anyone wanted to say something. Dr. Bharat came forward and said, "Baba, our problem is money." Baba said, "No, our problem is planning. When planning is there, money will come." This has always been my experience. When I write a project proposal, after carefully calculating exactly how the money will be spent, then I feel that the work is already half done. The money inevitably came. Nearly a million dollars in cash and kind was raised and invested in our projects during the 12 years I worked there.

Ananda Marga may not have financial resources, but we should stand by our efficiency, morality and sweet and loving behavior. These are our strengths. In any part of the world, if we research what the people actually need, make a careful plan, and start a project that truly meets their needs, we will win their support and money will come.

Serving humanity is not something to be done occasionally; it is a way of life. It means always being concerned for other peoples' interests. It is not something mechanical, it means to constantly think how to improve your service both qualitatively and quantitatively. If you surrender yourself to the flow of Dharma, of righteousness, then you will see the project seemingly grow by itself. For Dharma is the engine, and it will call you to give up your personal desires, to attempt greater and greater projects, to take risks, to stretch yourself ever further. Your meditation and your devotion is a part of this process, not separate from it.

Every week Baba used to ask for the news about the project. He inspired us to begin and to keep going. He was the invisible force behind everything. All the credit for our success goes to Him.

A VISION OF PROUT

In Burkina Faso, the common people do not have much political or socio-economic consciousness. Yet in our village meetings, the people themselves became interested in their collective welfare. In this process, the moralists, the honest people, naturally came forward to help.

I think Prout work should be based on social service. First we should see to the needs of the people. This is bottom-up development, empowering the people to decide for themselves. I think that today the world needs collective decision-making, not

authoritarian dictatorships any more. Spiritual leaders, Sadvipras, must do extensive research and take the time to listen carefully to the suggestions and opinions of everyone affected. Through this process, they will be able to make the best decisions for the welfare of all.

NGOs are growing in importance in the world, and I have found that many of their leaders share ideas and values in common with our Prout philosophy. I think we should try to work with them to uplift the human dignity of the people.

Real social work changes communities, and, as happened on different occasions in Burkina Faso, it polarizes the society and causes political reactions. Selfish political leaders inevitably turn against us. Proutists must constantly seek out and help create moral political leaders to support our work for the people.

The project trained many people and created many jobs in the villages: 4 well diggers, 15 in reforestation, 75 in growing vegetables, 28 to manage the cereal banks, 10 as health agents (who later became self-sufficient), 10 as literacy teachers, and 2 to run the millet grinder. Our experience was invaluable in learning how to form a self-sufficient socio-economic unit. The same can be done in any region through cooperatives.

