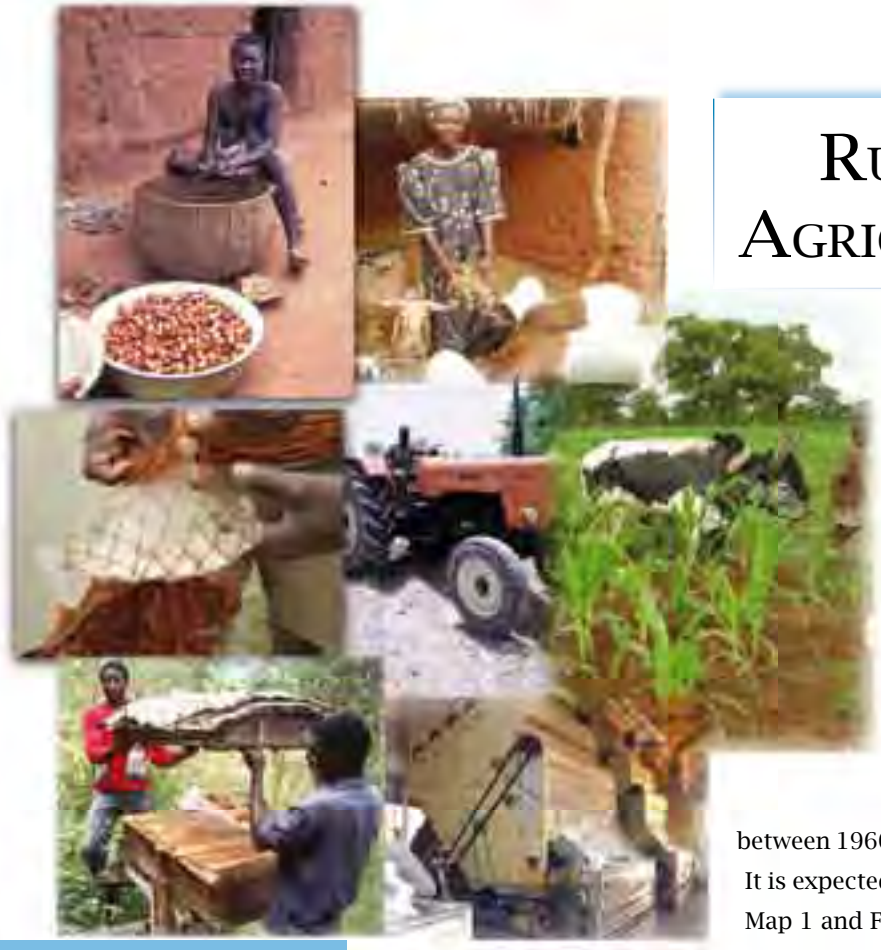
Atlas on Regional Integration in West Africa

land series



Rural Areas and Agricultural Changes

Introduction

The West African rural environment was long considered to be unchanging. But it is in fact at the heart of powerful transformations. The most important of these changes concerns the population and settlement. The region will certainly be mostly urban in 2020. According to United Nations' figures, in 2005 the urban population was 120 million or 43% of the total population. However, the rural population continues to increase; it more than doubled between 1960 and 2005, growing from 70 to 155 million people. It is expected to rise to almost 180 million people in 2020[1] (see Map 1 and Figure 1).

Defined as all people making their living from farming, hunting, fishing or forestry (including all people conducting agricultural activities, along with their inactive dependants), the agricultural population of West Africa fell from 80% of the total population in 1961 to less than 50% in 2005. The rural environment is no longer exclusively agricultural and some urban areas are still used for peri-urban agriculture and livestock farming.

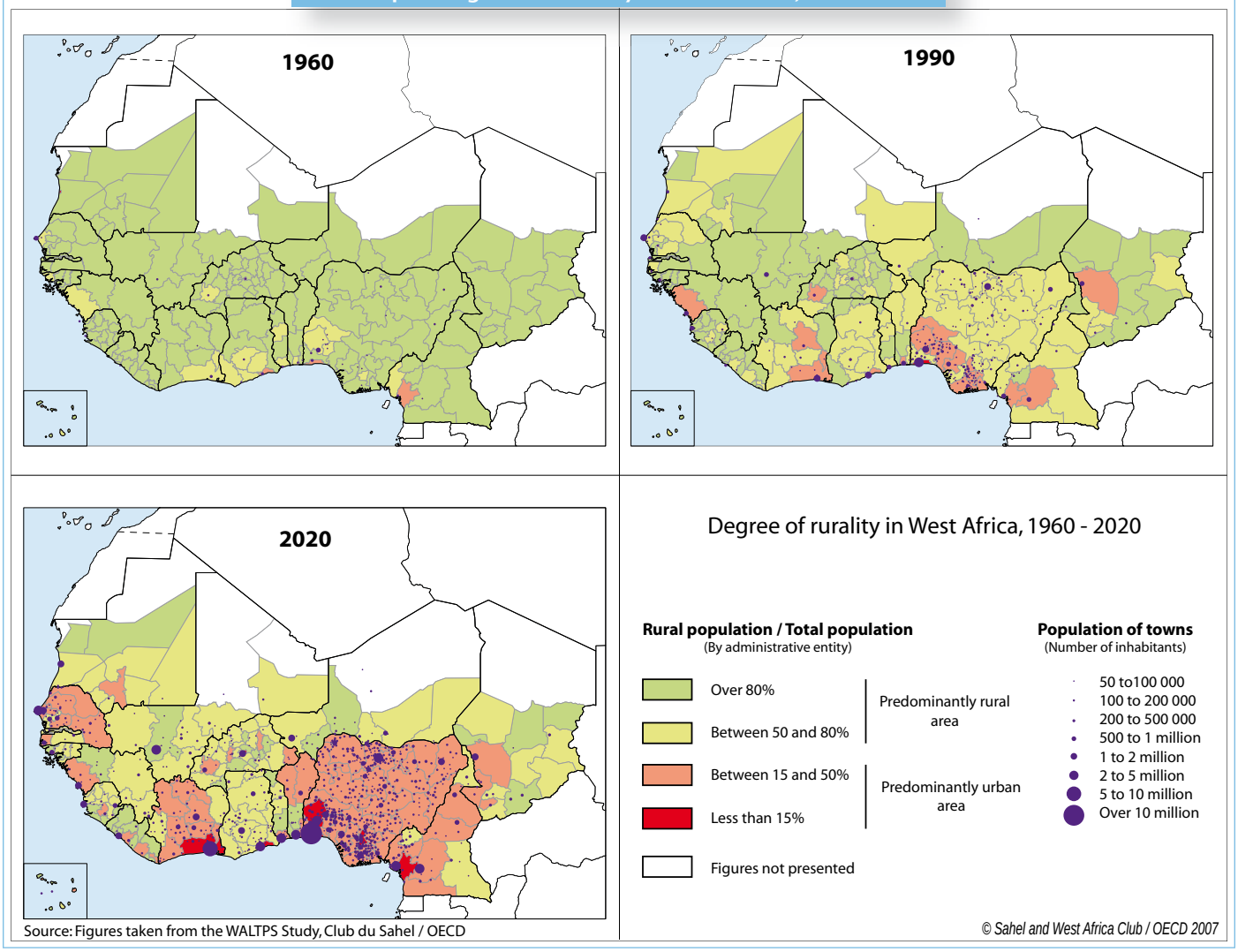
I. Life in Rural Areas at the Turn of the 21st Century

Living in the West African countryside at the turn of the 21st century no longer necessarily implies making a living from primary activities. Nor does it mean living in isolation from the rest of society, especially towns. Urban and rural areas are closely linked, even if disparities remain in terms of living conditions.

The Atlas on Regional Integration is an ECOWAS — SWAC/OECD initiative, financed by the development co-operation agencies of France, Switzerland and Luxembourg. Divided into four series (population, land, economy, environment), the Atlas chapters are being produced during 2006-2007 and will be available on-line on the site www.atlas-westafrica.org

1. See Atlas chapters on "Demography" and "The Urban Environment"- forthcoming 2007.

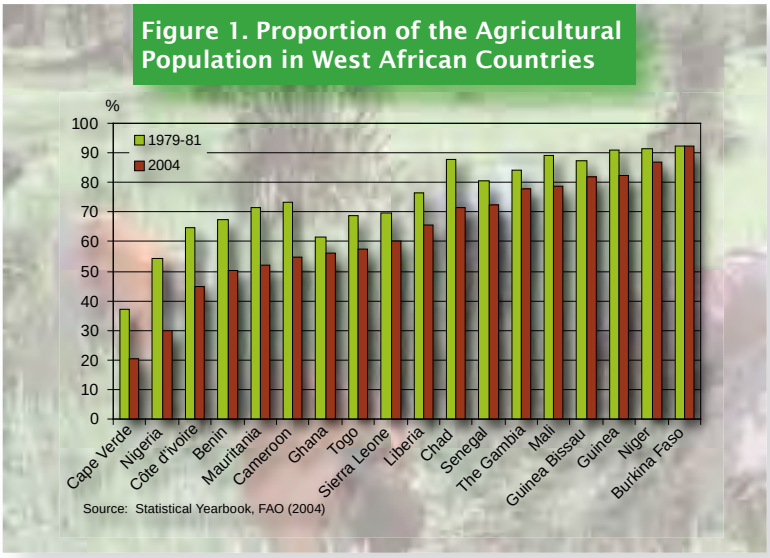
Map 1. Degree of Rurality in West Africa, 1960 - 2020



Source: Figures taken from the WALTPS Study, Club du Sahel / OECD

At all latitudes and at all times, access to health and education services is more difficult within rural areas than in towns. West Africa is no exception to this rule. In towns, 85% of the population now has access to drinking water and 58% to improved sanitation facilities, in rural zones these figures stand at only 45% and 28% respectively (see Figures 2 and 3). AIDS is no longer an urban disease. More than half of all people infected by the virus live in rural areas, where it appears to be spreading more rapidly than in towns. Rural-urban disparities are equally visible in education, but also in access to markets, information, culture and innovation; just some of the factors that, when combined, explain why poverty is higher in rural areas (see Table 1).

Figure 1. Proportion of the Agricultural Population in West African Countries



Source: Statistical Yearbook, FAO (2004)

Figure 2. Percentage of the Rural and Urban Populations with Access to an Improved Water Source (2002)

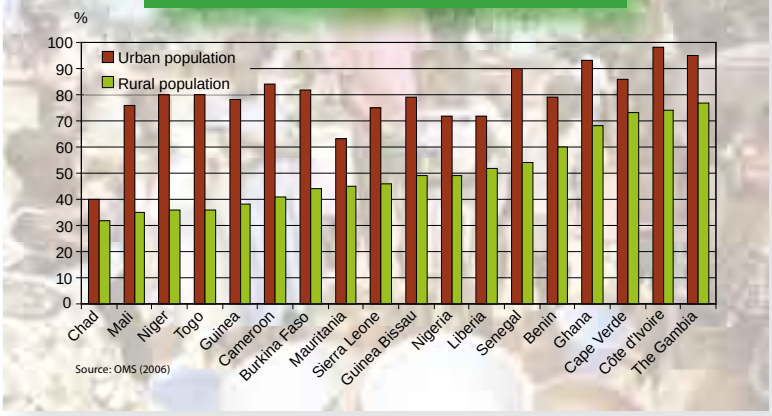


Figure 3. Percentage of the Urban and Rural Populations with Access to Improved Sanitation Facilities (2002)

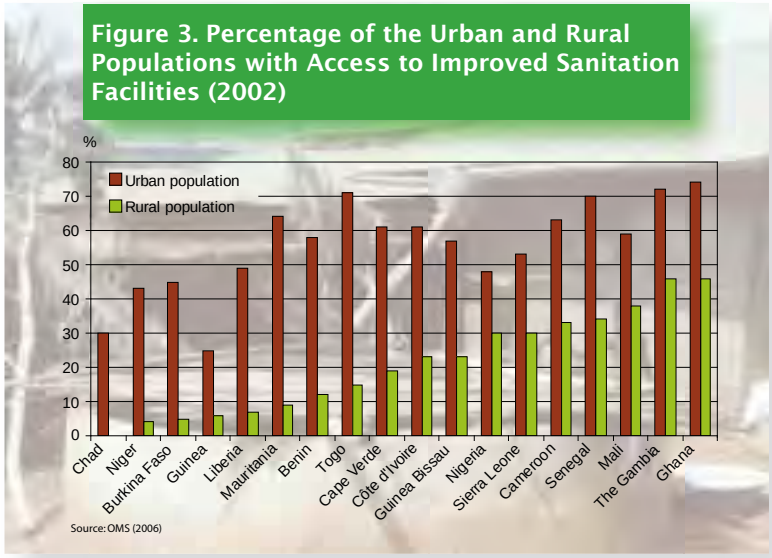


Table 1. Rural and Urban Poverty (as Percentage of Total Population)

Country	Survey year(s)	Rural	Urban	National
Benin	1999	33	23	29
Burkina Faso	1998	51	16	45
Cameroon	2001	50	22	40
Côte d'Ivoire	-	70	30	33
The Gambia	1998	61	48	58
Ghana	1998-99	50	19	39
Guinea	-	52	51	52
Guinea-Bissau	-	65	29	54
Mali	1998	76	30	64
Mauritania	2000	61	25	46
Niger	1998	68	30	48
Nigeria	1992-93	36	30	34
Senegal	1992	40	24	33
Sierra Leone	2003-04	79	56	70
Chad	1995-96	67	63	64
Togo	1997-89	n.a	n.a	32

Sources: World Bank, 2005 Development Indicators; IFAD, COSOP

II. Changes in the Rural Environment

2.1 Areas and Settlement

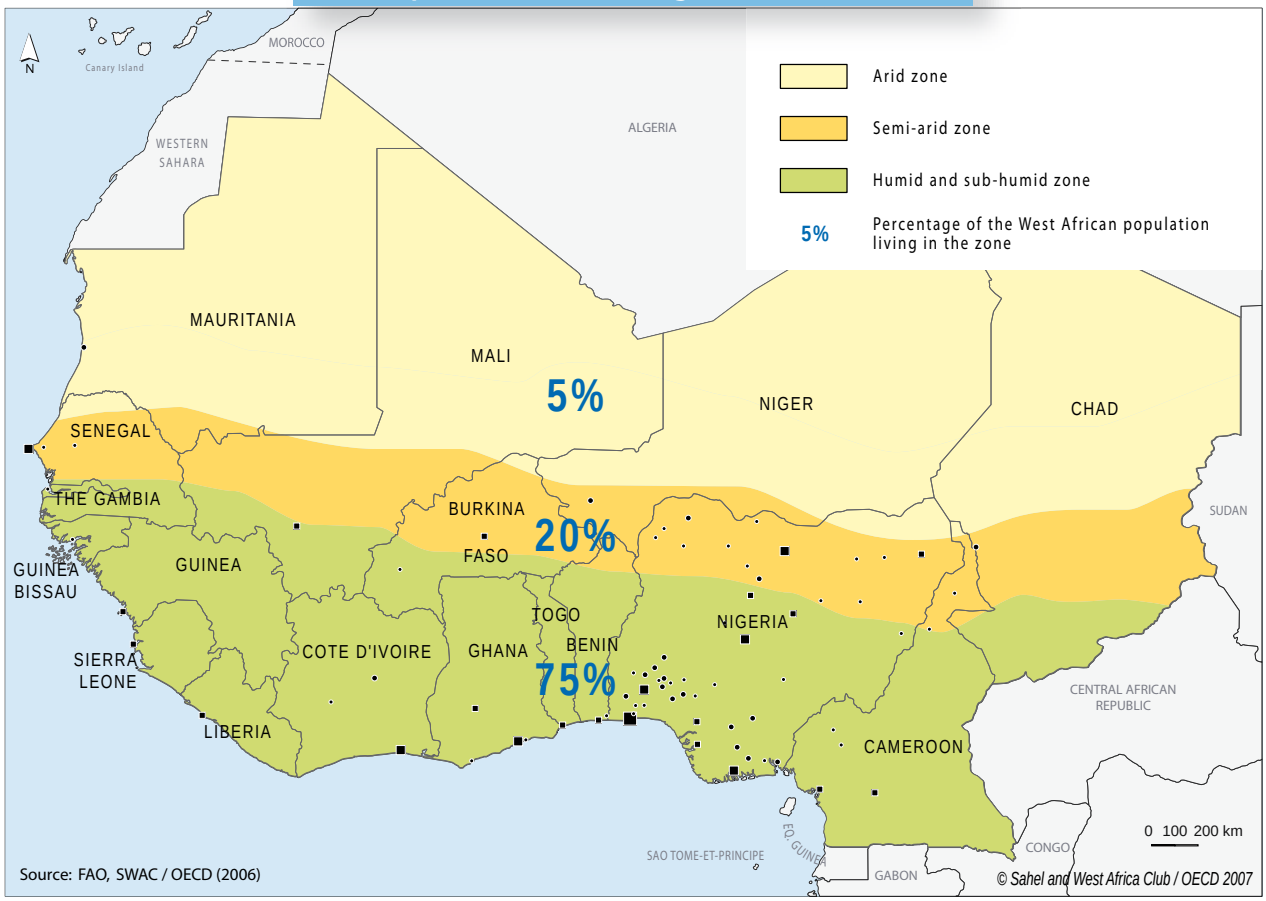
As a rule, settlement areas are linked to the climate. Three quarters of the West African population live in the humid and sub-humid zones, 20% in the semi-arid zone (the Sahel) and 5% in the arid zone (see Map 2). On this climate map, current settlement patterns still bear the marks of the old Sahelian centres and reflect the tremendous pull of the coastal areas. Today the region has three areas of high rural density (more than 50 people/km²), which are structured by the urban network (see Map 3). The first is along the Gulf of Guinea between Abidjan and Douala; the second is made up of a series of small areas around the coastal towns on the Atlantic coast between Dakar and Monrovia; finally, the third, which is also heterogeneous, stretches from Ouagadougou to N'Djamena, and includes three historical subsets: in central Burkina Faso (the Voltaic centre), in northern Nigeria (the Hausa centre) and around northern Cameroon (the Kanuri centre).

Conversely, sparsely populated rural areas (fewer than 15 people/km²) are situated in apparently hostile environments (arid or very humid zones) but also in the "middle belt", which roughly corresponds to the areas of valleys affected by river blindness which was eradicated between the mid-1970s and the late 1990s. The settlement or re-settlement of these valleys is not yet over. Certain regions where a good deal of land is still available have population growth rates exceeding 3% per year (above the regional average). Surely new frontiers are developing (see Map 3).

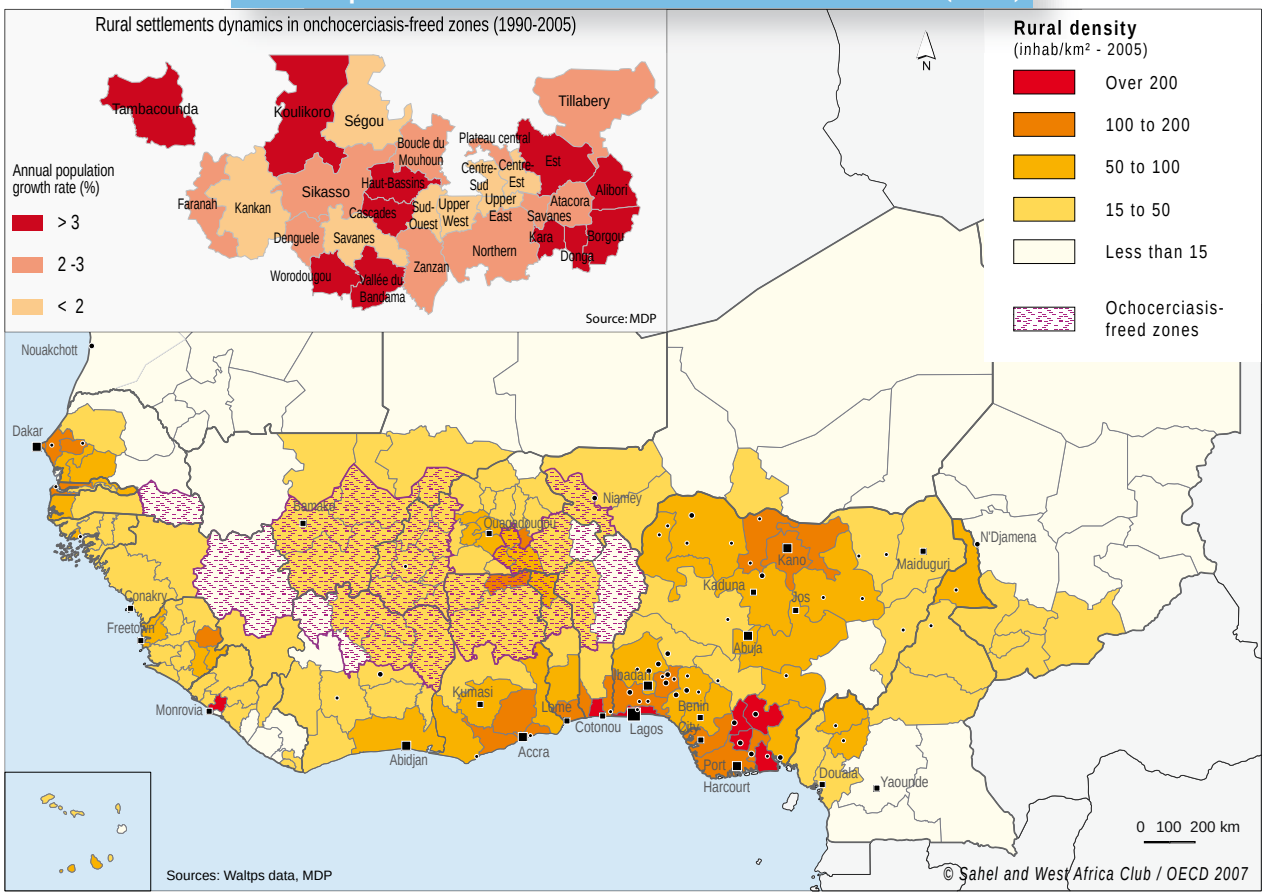
2.2 Land Dynamics

At the regional level, cultivated areas grew from 8.4 to 11.8% of all land between 1961 and 2002. There is still considerable potential

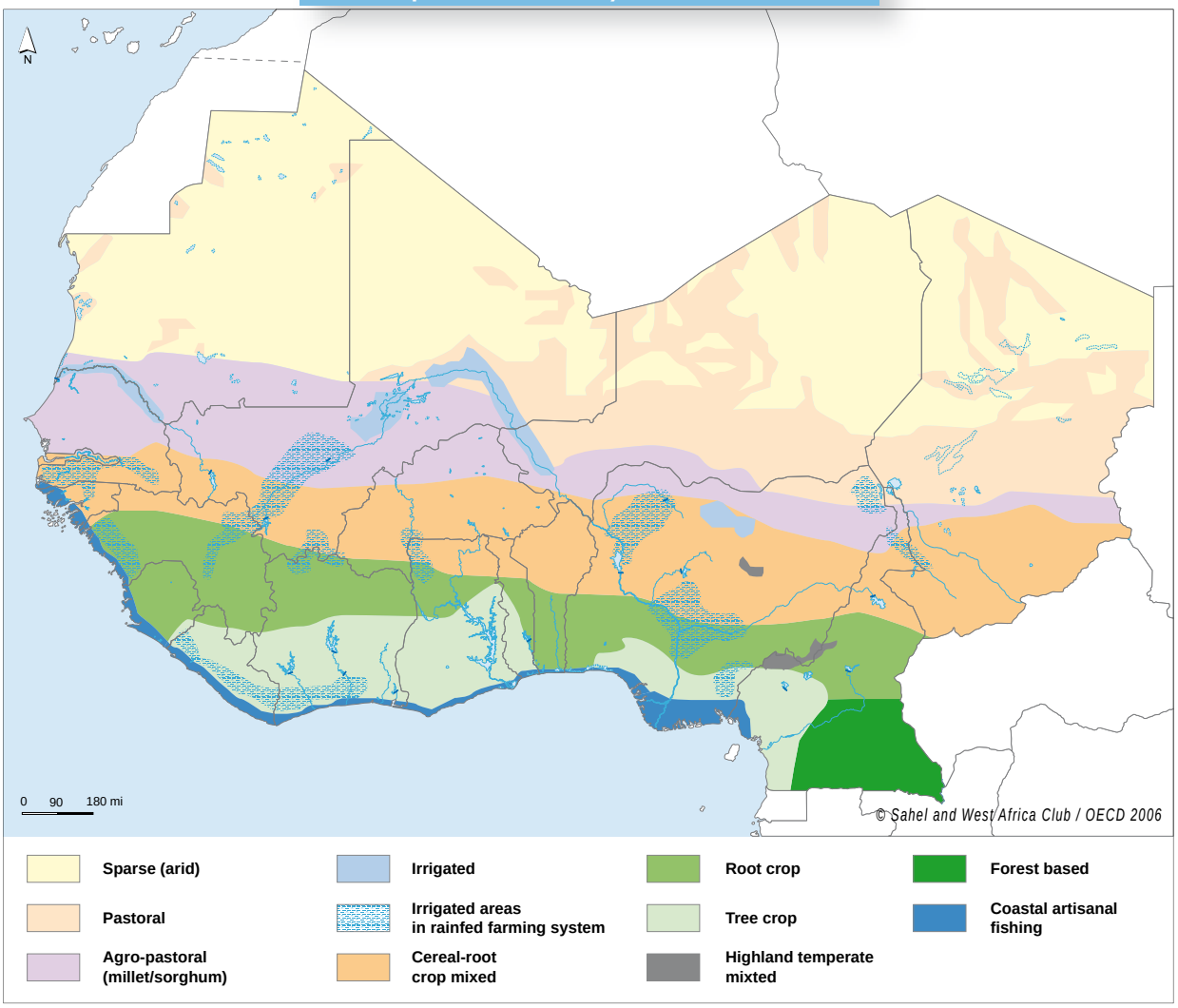
Map 2. Settlement and Agro-climatic Conditions



Map 3. A Picture of Rural Settlement in West Africa (2005)



Map 4. Production Systems in West Africa



cropland since only 36% of this land is actually cultivated. Average land pressure[2] is moderate (1.4 people/ha in recent years compared to 1 in the 1960s) and remains lower than the average for developing countries, which stands at around 2.3 people/ha. Land for grazing remains stable, although in certain Sahel regions, transhumance corridors and staging points have disappeared or have been turned into farmland (see Table 2 and Map 4).

However, considerable land problems remain. This is the case, for example, in rural areas close to the urbanised coast of the Gulf of Guinea (see Map 5). Long natural fallow periods, which were the basis of soil fertility management, are shorter and cultivated plots are increasingly exploited. This leads to soil deterioration resulting in lower productive capacity, and therefore a reduction in yields. Farmers are obliged to use more inputs and in some cases they temporarily or permanently abandon certain plots.

2. The ratio of agricultural population to arable land or land under permanent crops.

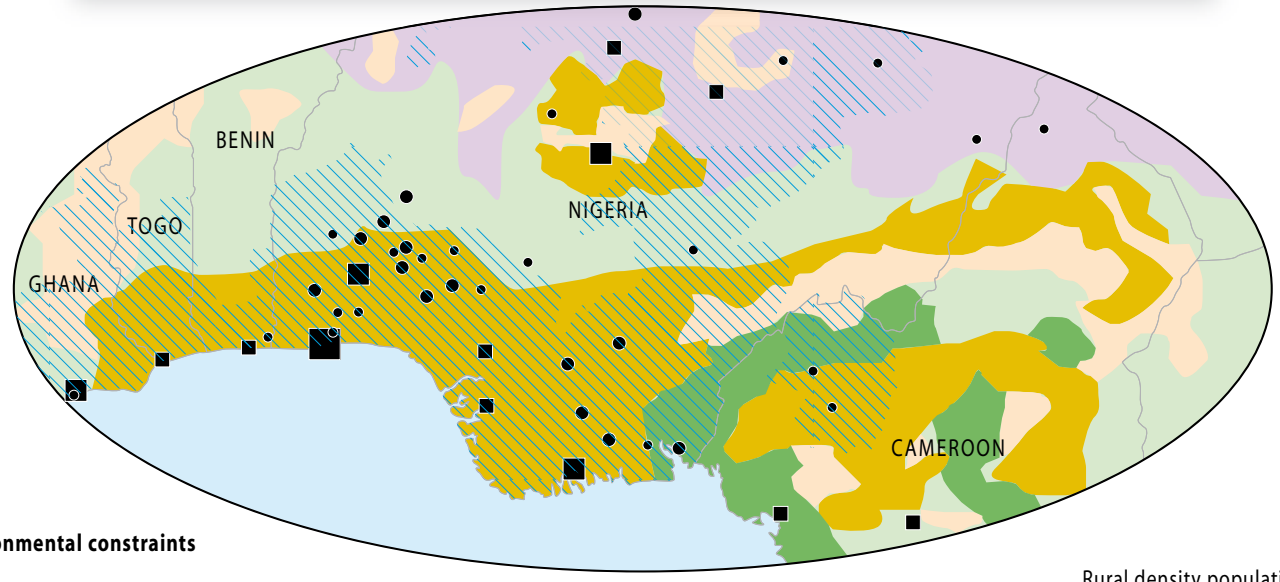
Table 2. Land Use in West Africa (1961 – 2002)

	Area of land (1000 ha)	Arable land (%)			Land under permanent crops (%)			Pastures (%)		
	2002	1961	1980	2002	1961	1980	2002	1961	1980	2002
West Africa	790,000	7.6	8.1	10.3	0.8	1.1	1.5	28.8	28.8	29.2
World	13,432,000	9.5	10.0	10.4	0.7	0.8	1.0	23.2	24.1	25.6

Source: FAO Statistical Yearbook (2004)

The way in which land resources are perceived is evolving. As a production factor in a market economy, land is acquiring greater value. Irrigated plots, rich or well-drained soil, and proximity to major consumption centres and input suppliers are some of the factors of an agricultural land market that is rapidly developing. Private investment by non-agricultural urban operators is a new trend that is likely to develop in the future. On the other hand, a move towards the decapitalisation of the land of the poorest social classes is expected.

Map 5. Principal Environmental Constraints in the Coastal Area of the Gulf of Guinea



Source: FAO, World Bank (2001)

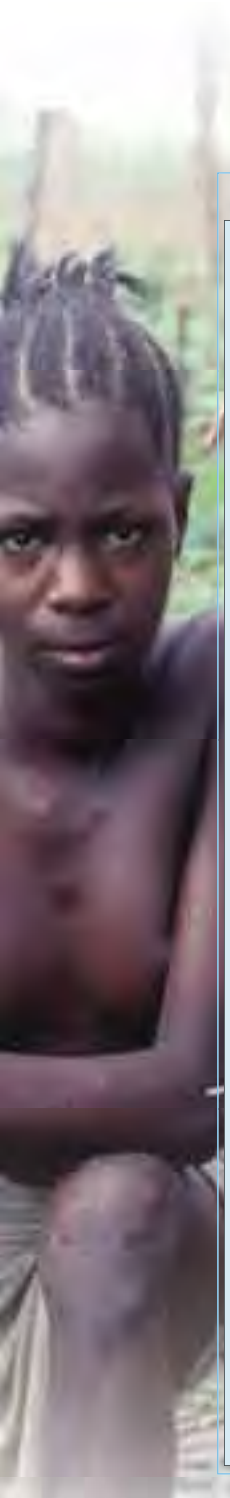
In this context, the land reforms launched in the mid-1980s are pushing the limits of tradition and modern law to strike a balance between the promotion of a capitalistic form of agriculture and that of equity. Progress is slow and dialogue is difficult.

There is considerable potential for conflict linked to these rural changes, whether due to the agricultural colonisation of the lowlands traditionally used for grazing, transhumance through areas of cropland or the management of water resources. In many cases, these problems are regional. Once situated in the Sahelian countries, the centre of gravity for West African livestock farming is now imperceptibly shifting towards the north of the coastal countries. This slow migration of herds is accompanied by that of cattle-rearing populations. Land disputes that were once confined to individual groups are now also causing inter-community disagreements.

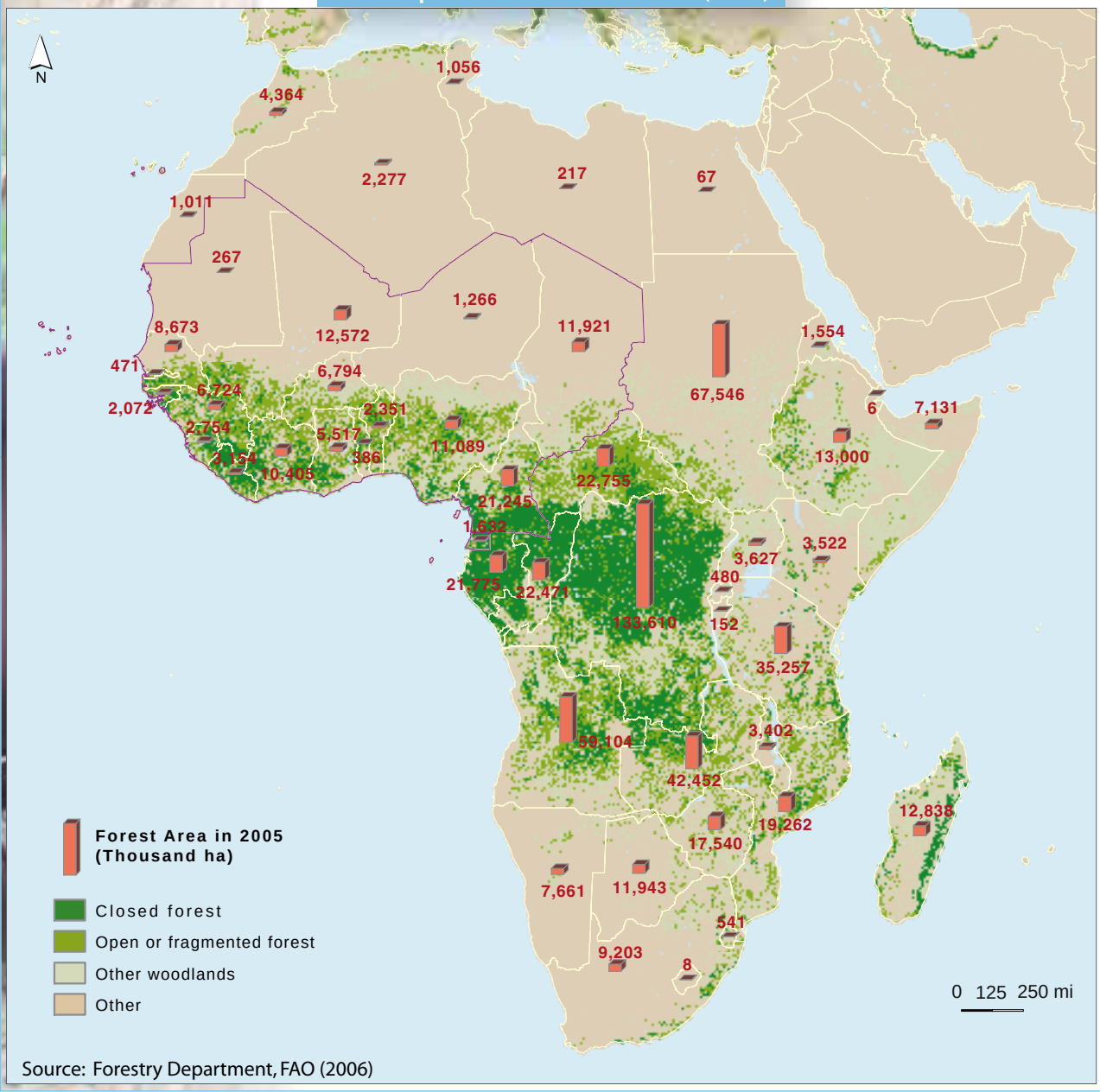
3. West African forest cover is made up of closed forests, open or fragmented forests and other woodland. The dry zone is made up of steppe vegetation, bush and open savannah woodland. The more productive humid zone is characterised by savannah woodland, semi-deciduous tropical forest and tropical rainforest.
4. A total of 90% of the productive use of West African forest cover was for household energy purposes in 2005, compared to 86% in the 1980s. The production of industrial roundwood remains more modest and is increasing more slowly than the population.

The 107 million hectares of forest[3] in West Africa are clearly not exempt from these changes in rural areas (see Map 6). It is estimated that between 1990 and 2005, forest cover diminished at a rate of 1.2 million hectares per year, which is far higher than the average for the continent. This reduction was seen in the fragmentation of cover, especially in the humid zone: a shift from closed forest to open forest and then to woodland. According to FAO estimations, over 10% of closed forests were transformed into open forests between 1980 and 2000 and between 3 and 7% of fragmented forests became woodland during the same period.

These changes are linked to extensive agriculture (cacao, coffee, etc.), forestry (wood energy and log exports[4]), mining activities, the development of infrastructure and fires.



Map 6. Forest Cover in Africa (2005)



Source: Forestry Department, FAO (2006)

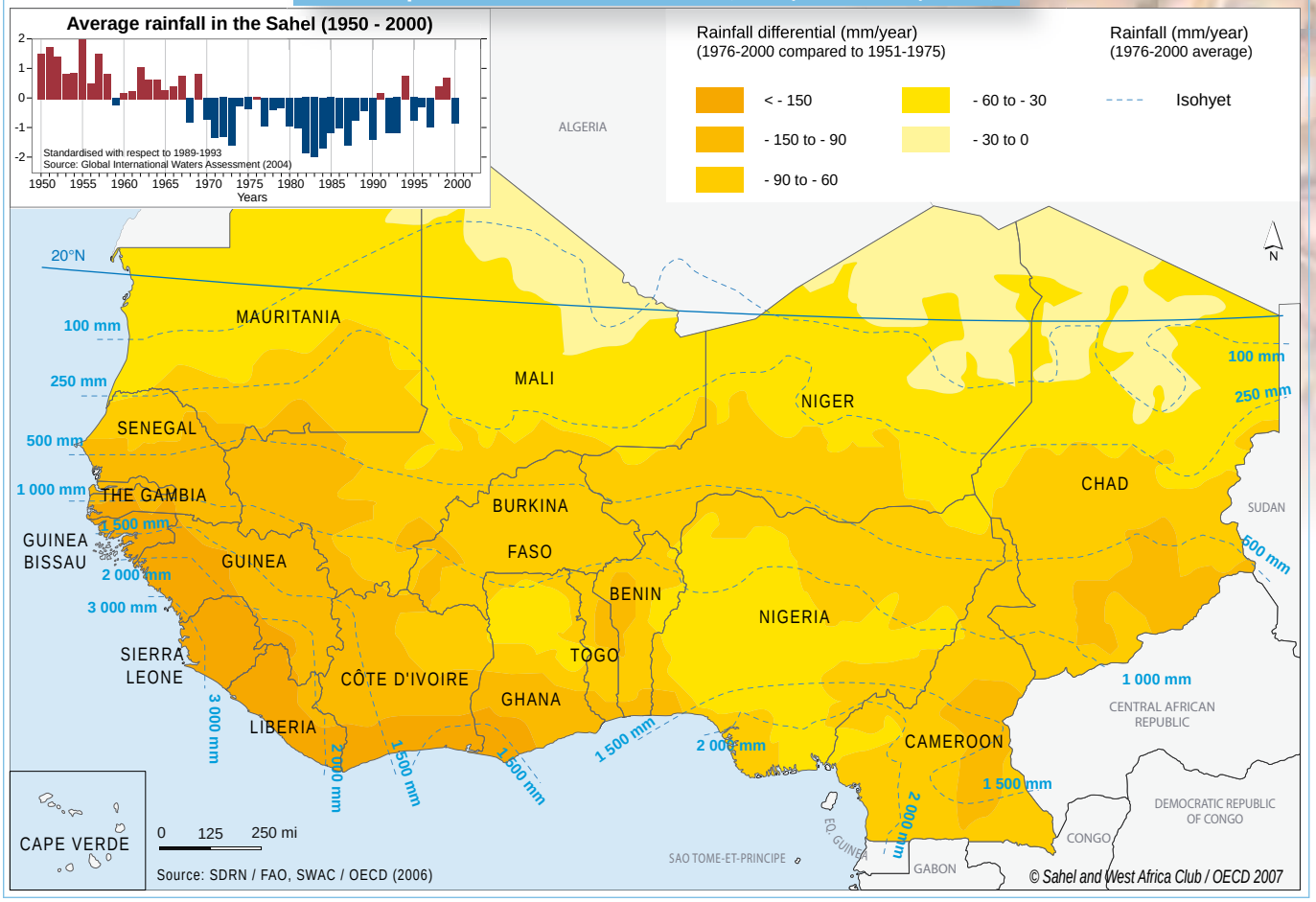
2.3 Climate

A "wet" period from the 1950s to the early 1970s was followed by a dry period characterised by the two great droughts of 1973 and 1984. Between these two periods, the reduction in rainfall was remarkable[5]. It was considerable in the coastal areas (minus 150 mm/year), but rainfall there remains high (between 2,000 and 3,000 mm/year). In the Sahel region, the reduction in rainfall was not as strong (minus 60 to 90 mm/year), but was felt more acutely (see Map 7). This vision of course has certain limits, due to the fixed comparative periods. For the Sahelian countries, for example, the dry periods lasted from the early 1970s until the early 1990s. Since then, rainfall has increased, although it remains highly variable[6]. The reduction in rainfall results in desertification, the descent of herds towards the south and a drop in river levels[7] and in biomass production[8] (see Map 8). The impact of climate change can also contribute to these changes.

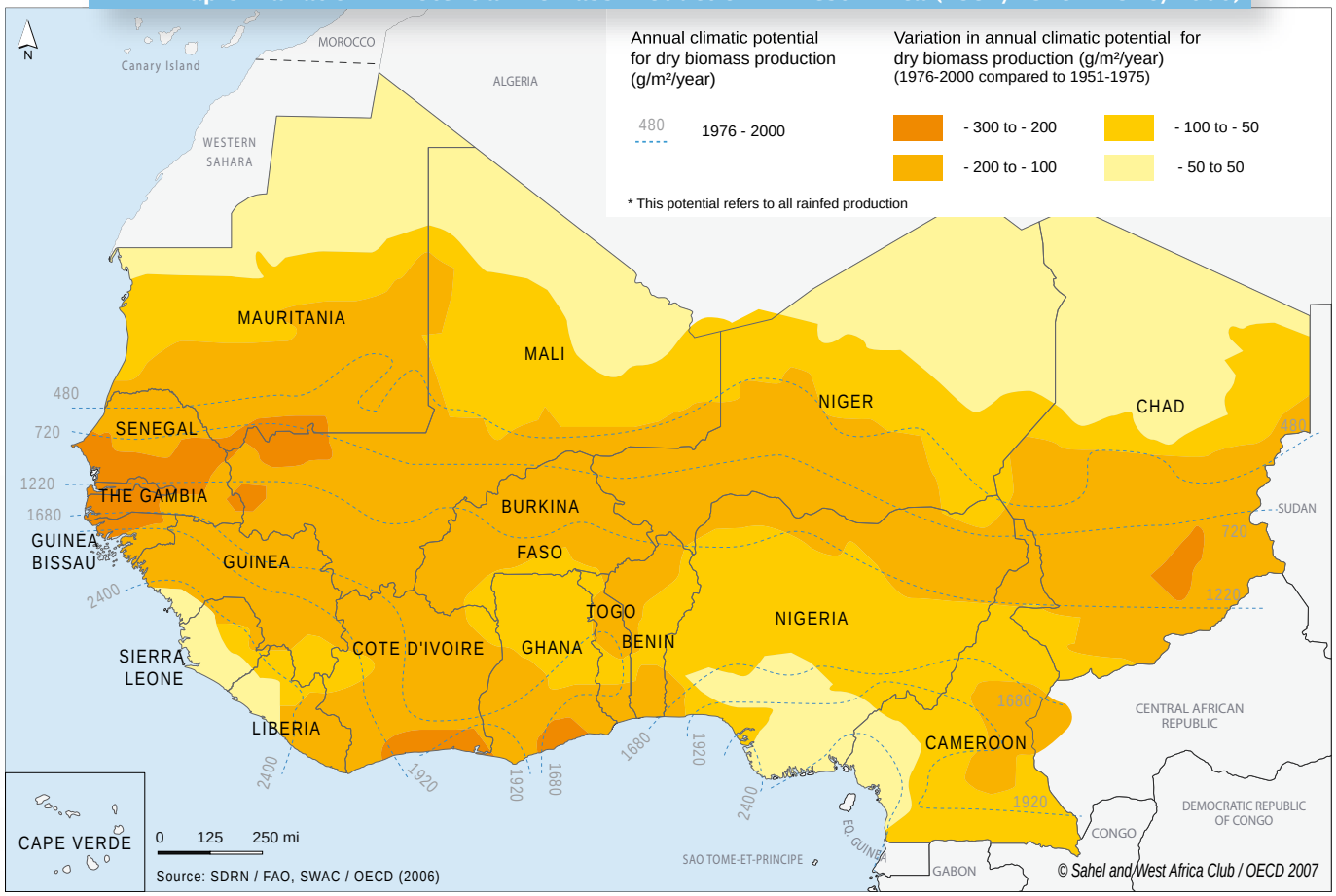
Despite being difficult to assess, the decrease in potential production of dry cereals or fodder for livestock is clear. The great Sahel droughts affected fodder production and consequently the animal population. During the 1982/84 period, the cattle population dropped by almost 60% in Niger, because herds were either decimated or moved southward.

5. See Atlas chapter on "The climate" – forthcoming 2007.
6. Atlas on Regional Integration (2006): The ecologically vulnerable zone of the Sahelian countries.
7. Some estimations show that the levels of the rivers Senegal and Gambia dropped by almost 60% in the 1970s and 1980s. The river Niger dropped by around 15%.
8. FAO estimations show that between 1951/1975 and 1976/2000, the reduction in rainfall resulted in a reduction in dry biomass production of between 100 and 200 g/m²/year in the Sahelian regions of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and northern Nigeria; this reduction reached between 200 and 300 g/m²/year in Senegambia.

Map 7. Rainfall in West Africa (1951/75 – 1976/2000)



Map 8. Variation in Potential Biomass Production in West Africa (1951/1975 – 1976/2000)



III. Rural Economy and Agricultural Economy

3.1 Production

In 1960, 85% of the population lived in rural areas centred around a self-subsistence economy with few connections to the marginal urban world (see Figure 4). The rural economy, which was almost exclusively agricultural, generated half of the region's GDP. Over the last 50 years, cities have expanded and increased in number to become connected with each other and with rural areas. The rural sector's working population, despite being more numerous, now plays a smaller part in the economy, particularly in favour of the informal urban sector[9], and accounts for 30% of the region's GDP.

Although the rural economy is diversifying (agricultural product processing, mining, handicrafts, trade, transport and tourism), it is still dominated by agricultural activities, whose share in the income of the rural population will long remain preponderant[10].

9. Club du Sahel (1998): *Preparing for the Future: A Vision of West Africa in the Year 2020.*
10. In Cameroon, for example, the share of agricultural income in rural income could fall from 72% in 2002 to 66% in 2020. Cour, Jean Marie (2006): *Développement rural et urbanisation, quels enjeux ?*

Figure 4. Breakdown of West Africa's Working Population

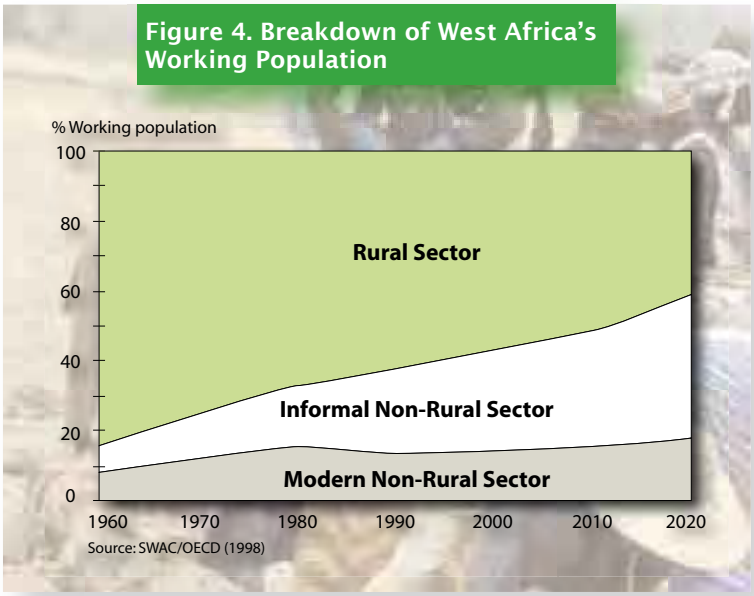


Table 3. Contribution of Agriculture, Livestock Farming, Forestry and Fishing to the Agricultural Sector in some West African Countries

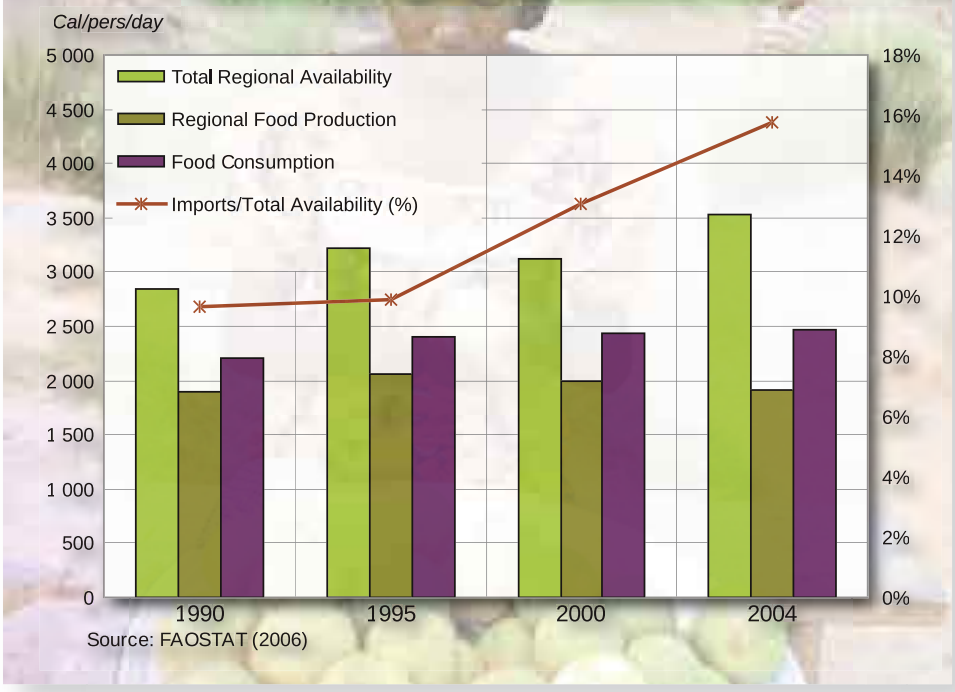
	Agriculture	Livestock farming	Forestry	Fishing	Years
Burkina Faso	55%	35%	10%		2004
Cameroon	76%	12%	6%	6%	2004
The Gambia	68%	23%	3%	6%	2004
Guinea	95%	19%	12%	4%	2004
Mali	58%	28%	14%		2004
Mauritania	20%	53%	-	27%	2005
Niger	56%	33%	11%		2003
Nigeria	83%	10%	2%	5%	2003
Senegal	55%	30%	5%	10%	2003
Chad	47%	44%	-	9%	2002

Source: IMF country data

Agriculture accounts for over half of the West African countries' "agricultural GDP", except in Mauritania, where the livestock farming sector predominates. The latter is the second largest contributor to "agricultural GDP" in the other countries, particularly in the Sahelian countries, where it represents 30 to 40% of this GDP (see Table 3).

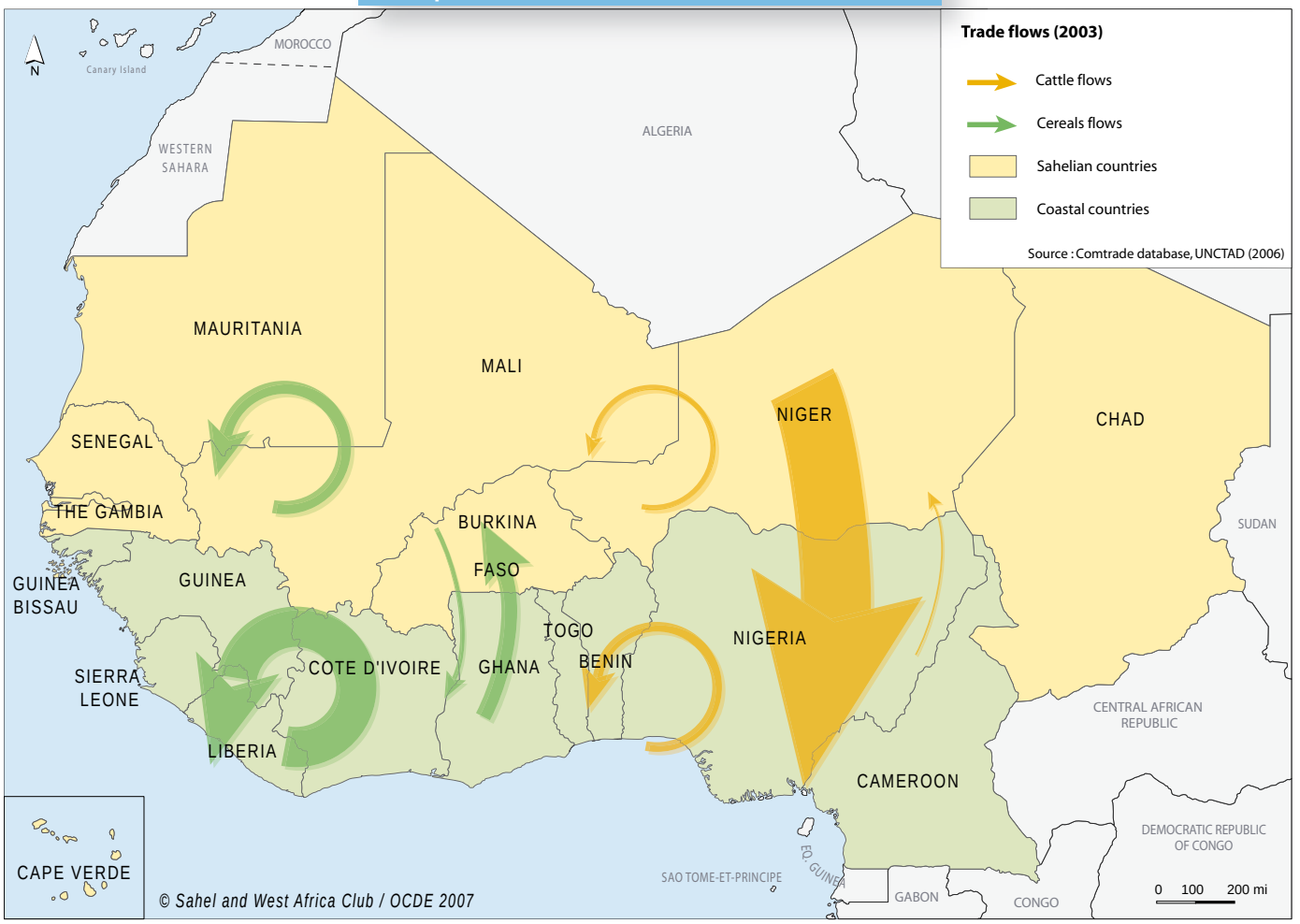
Post-independence, agricultural policies focused on promoting the export sectors ensuring foreign exchange inflows (palm oil, coffee, cocoa, cotton, groundnuts, etc.) that had been established during colonial rule. But food crops made the most progress, growing from 71% of agricultural production volume in 1960 to 78% in 2005. This boom concerns cereal crops (rice and corn), tubers and fruit and vegetable production, as well as the livestock and dairy sectors. This trend can be explained by high growth in urban demand, decreasing public investment in cash crops and international market price fluctuations.

Figure 5. West African Calorific Balance Sheet (1990 – 2004)



Source: FAOSTAT (2006)

Map 9. Cereal and Cattle Trade in West Africa

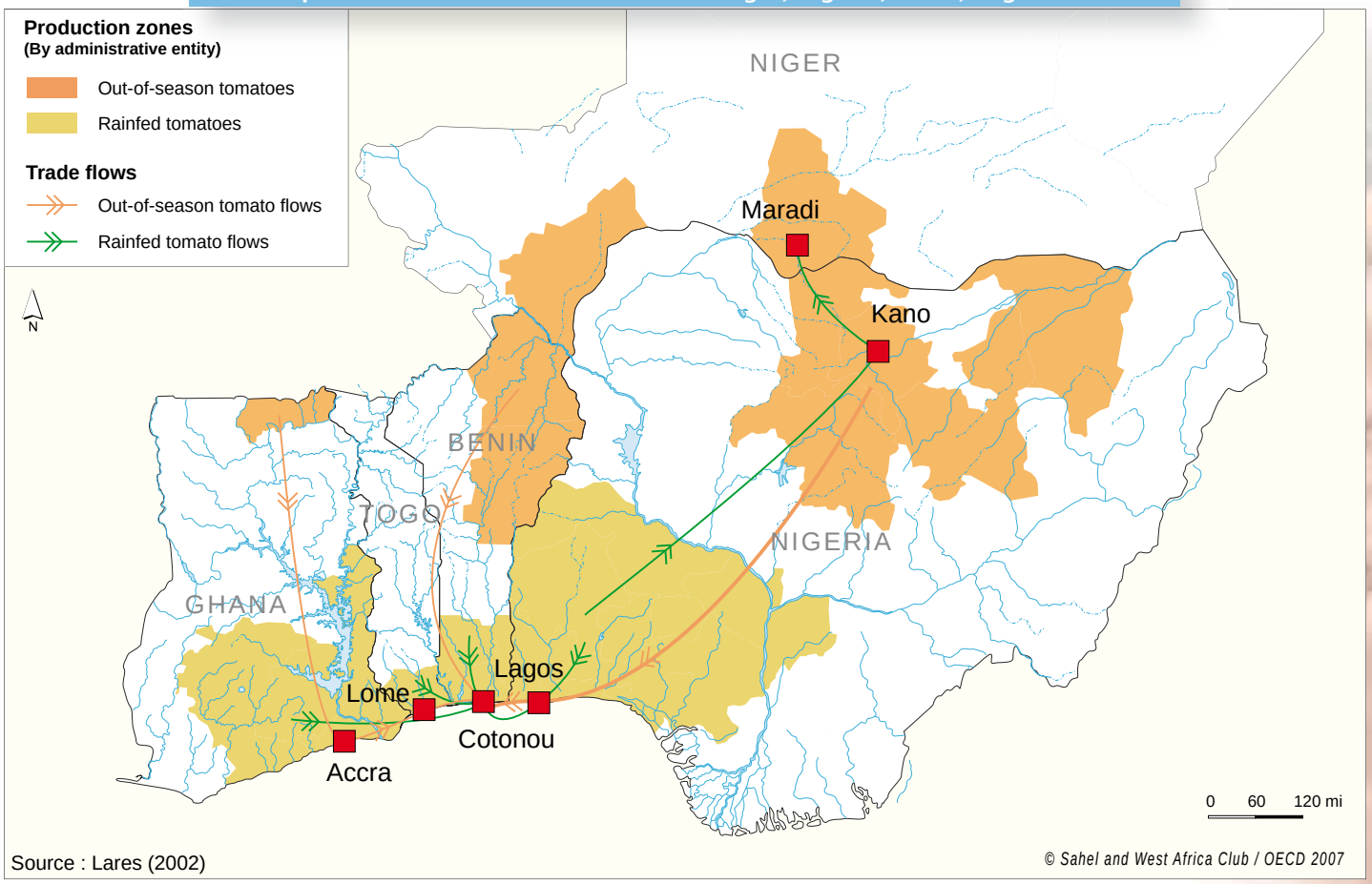


An analysis of food production and consumption indices calculated in calories per capita per day and also in terms of imports (see Figure 5) shows that agriculture has succeeded to a large extent in coping with the high population growth. Food production per capita/day has remained stable over the past 25 years (at around 2,000 calories), while consumption has risen considerably over the last 15 years (from 2,200 to almost 2,500 cal/capita/day), stimulated by an increase in incomes, especially in urban areas. Consequently, food imports have risen to 16% of available regional stocks.

3.2 Regional Trade

East-west complementarities (between plateau regions and mangrove areas) and north-south complementarities (between the Sahel, the savannah and forests) stimulate long-distance trade (see Map 9). Sahelian cereal and meat flows are mostly directed towards the coast. The tubers, fruit and vegetables of the Sudanese savannah supply not only the network of secondary towns criss-crossing this area, but also the cities of the coastal and Sahelian countries (for example, trade in rain-fed or off-season tomatoes supplies the coastal cities of Cotonou and Lagos, see Map 10). Harvested produce from the forest region is

Map 10. Fresh Tomato Trade between Niger, Nigeria, Benin, Togo and Ghana



directed towards the consumption centres in the north of the coastal and Sahel countries, as is the case with the palm oil trade, from Guinea Bissau and Guinea to Senegal and Mali (see Map 11).

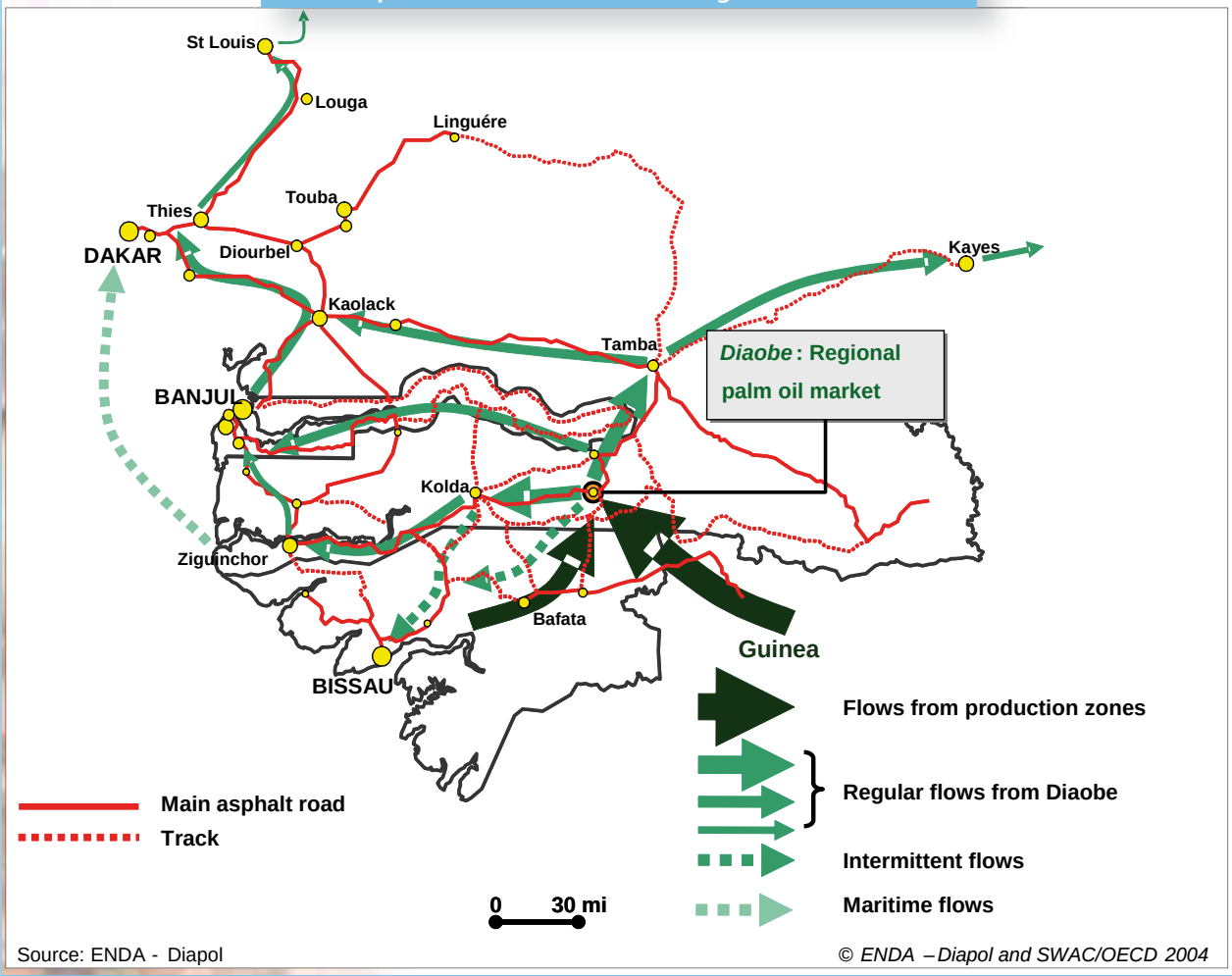
This trade, whose volumes are impossible to assess today, has almost certainly increased a great deal over the last few decades. Built upon old structured networks, sometimes well-linked to the informal foreign exchange market, they have benefited from the growth in urban demand and from improvements in storage and transport infrastructure. Economic liberalisation and regional construction (ECOWAS, UEMOA) are also favourable elements, even if the application of the principle of the free flow of goods, without any customs duties or quantitative restrictions, still poses problems.

IV. Some Challenges for the Future

4.1 Meeting the Demands of Regional Market Growth

In 2025, West Africa could count 140 million more people than in 2005. A farmer will have to feed 2.25 people, compared to 1.75 today and there will be less potential for extending cropland areas than in the past. Agricultural intensification, which is already underway, notably in peri-urban areas, will inevitably continue.

Map 11. Palm Oil Trade in Sénégambie méridionale



In comparison with other parts of the world, agricultural intensification in West Africa remains low. Although fertiliser consumption increased five-fold from 1970 to 2000, it is still 10 times lower than the world average (see Table 4).

Irrigation use is also expected to increase. West Africa has considerable potential in this field – over 9 million hectares[11] – which is as yet little used (8% of irrigable land) in comparison with other regions, especially North Africa (see Map 12). Today, fewer than a million hectares of land are effectively irrigated in the region, to which the same amount

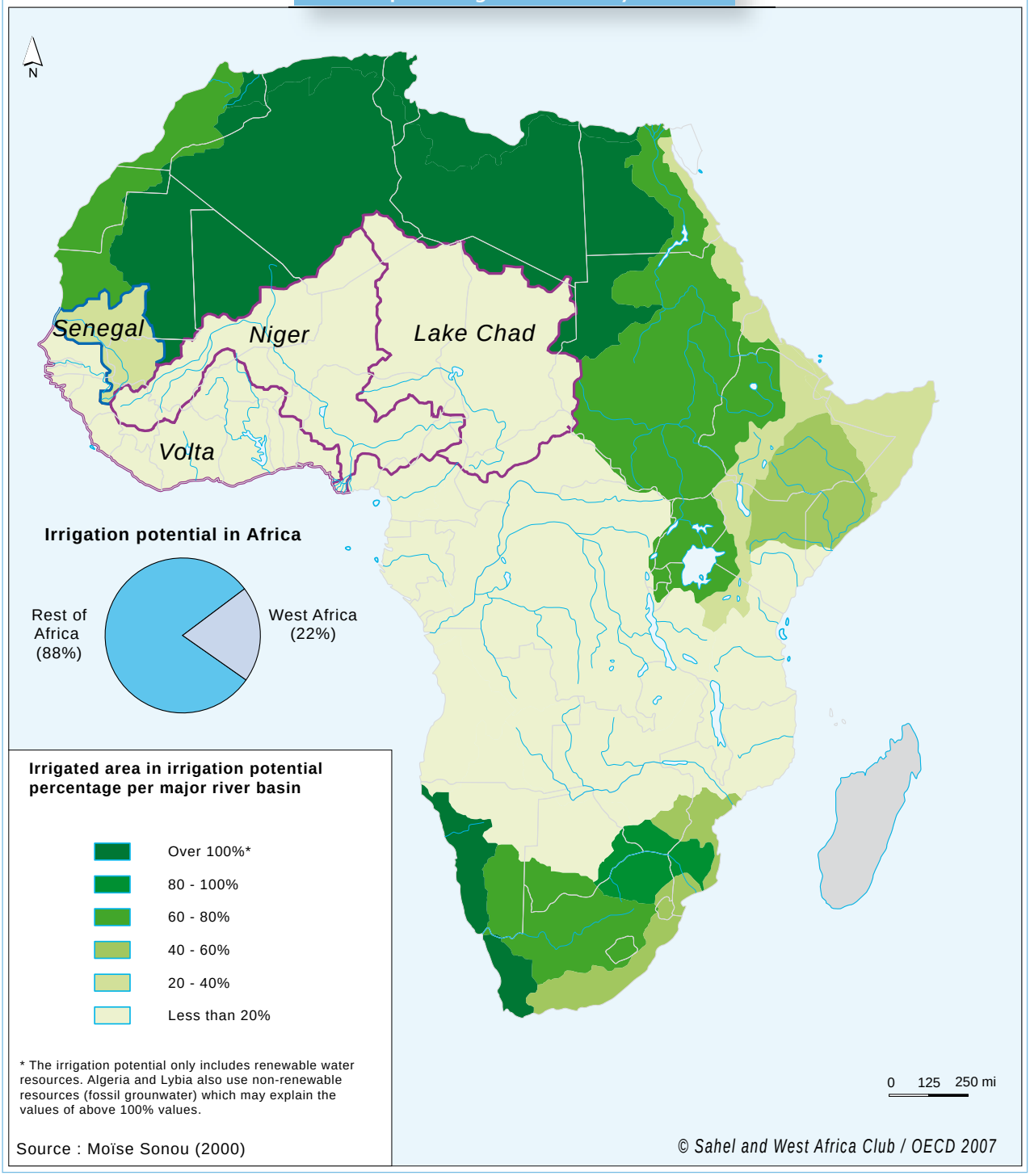
11. Aquastat (2005): *Irrigation in Africa in Figures.*

Table 4. Use of Fertilisers and Tractors around the World

	Fertilisers (kg/person working in the agricultural sector)		Tractors/1,000 people working in the agricultural sector	
	1970	2000	1970	2000
Africa	6.1	8.7	1.3	1.2
Asia	8.2	37.1	0.5	4.1
Europe	281.0	362.8	68.6	177.2
Latin America and the Caribbean	23.7	113.7	5.2	16.3
North America	1,430.2	2,995.0	513.6	762.0
West Africa	0.8	3.9	0.1	0.4
World	34.7	52.5	8.1	10.5

Source: FAOSTAT (2006)

Map 12. Irrigation Intensity in Africa



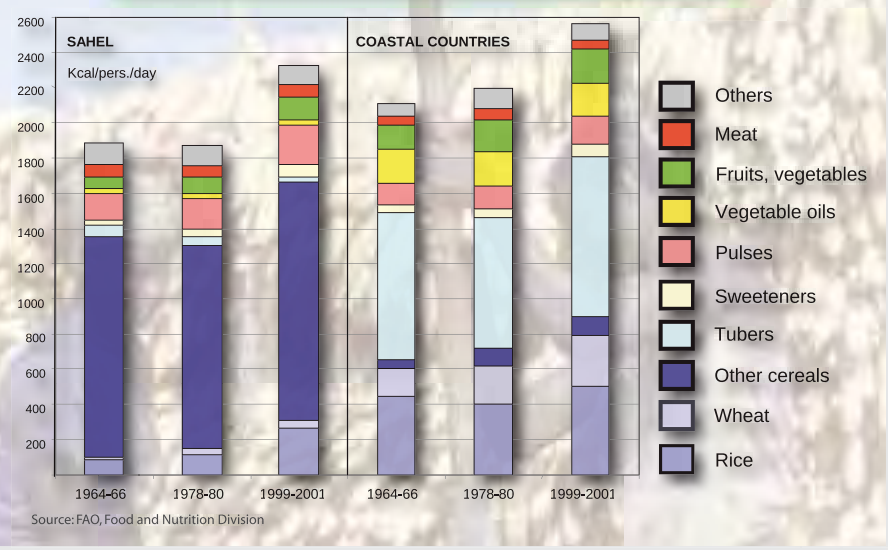
of shallow or receding water areas must be added. However, prospects seem to focus on the increase in cropping intensity[12] rather than that of irrigated areas[13].

4.2 Reacting to Changing Consumption Patterns

West African patterns of food consumption are changing under the effect of the development of the market economy, the connection of rural and urban areas and urbanisation. City dwellers increasingly value imported rice and wheat and they are diversifying their intake (particularly more fruit, vegetables and pulses) (see Figure 6)[14].

12. Cropping intensity is a perimeter's annual cropping area/equipped area. In West Africa, specialists estimate that this ratio could increase from 129% in 1996 to 156% in 2030.
13. Sonou Moïse (2000): *Tendances et perspectives de l'irrigation en Afrique sub-saharienne.*
14. In traditional cereal-producing countries, the cereal base represents half the cost of a dish in rural areas and only a third in towns.

Figure 6. Food Availability Trends in West Africa



The advantage of imported cereals is mostly due to their regular availability on the market, in terms of both quality and quantity, due to the food security policies implemented by States and regional institutions in order to ensure regular supplies to cities at reasonable prices. But this attraction towards imported cereals also concerns rural areas and intermediate towns in the Sahel in the lean season. On the contrary, the irregularity of local product markets, exchange rate fluctuations and the vagaries of seasonal supplies depending on climatic conditions make investments in products of this type less attractive.

However, food crops have undergone a relative diversification: the development of the West African production of rice, corn, tubers, fruit and vegetables, meat and milk (see Table 5). This agricultural diversification, which is admittedly still limited, is largely based on family farming[15], which is also now turning to trade in processed products adapted to urban constraints: attieke and gari (manioc) have become veritable "national dishes" for urban dwellers in Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Nigeria; in the Sudanese area yams have begun to compete with cotton crops due to the growth in urban demand[16].

15. Camilla Toulmin and Bara Guèye (2003): *Transformation in West African Agriculture and the Role of Family Farms.*
16. Pélissier Paul (2000): *Les interactions rurales – urbaines en Afrique de l'Ouest et du Centre.*

Table 5. Growth in Agricultural Crop Production and Yields in West Africa

West Africa	Crop areas 2005 (Million ha)	Production 2005 (Million tonnes)	Yields 2005 t/ha	Annual growth rate (1970/2005)		
				Crop areas	Production	Yields
Fruits	3.3	18.5	5.6	1.6%	2.2%	0.6%
Corn	9.0	10.8	1.2	2.7%	3.5%	0.7%
Millet	15.5	11.9	0.8	1.1%	2.0%	1.0%
Oilseed	15.7	4.7	0.3	1.4%	2.0%	0.6%
Dry pulses	11.2	4.1	0.4	1.7%	2.9%	1.2%
Rice (Paddy)	6.0	7.9	1.3	3.3%	3.8%	0.5%
Roots and tubers	12.8	106.0	8.3	2.9%	3.2%	0.3%
Sorghum	13.4	12.6	0.9	1.1%	2.1%	1.0%
Vegetables	2.5	14.1	5.6	2.2%	3.0%	0.7%

Source : FAOSTAT (2006)

The agri-food business is developing in the highest density urban-rural areas, especially in Nigeria. This agribusiness is based on large capitalistic farms, which maintain close connections with input supply chains. In some cases, small farms work on a contractual basis with industries (Mauritania's milk production sector or tomatoes in Senegal). Companies doing large-scale manioc processing for animal feed and other industrial by-products are being set up in Ghana and Nigeria, creating a large market for producers.

4.3 Protecting the Regional Market

The West African food market is suffering from multiple trade policies of regional States. National customs policies aimed at protecting the domestic market are thwarted by the far more liberal strategies of their neighbours. The establishment of the UEMOA Common External Tariff (CET) has opened the way, even if protection rates for rice, milk and meat are low. The extension of the CET to all ECOWAS countries – scheduled in principle from 1 January 2008 – should eliminate distortions between protectionist countries such as Nigeria and very open countries such as the Gambia. Differences in national interests explain the region's still ambiguous position on the methods of this extension. Monetary differences also play a considerable part, especially due to the overvaluation of the CFA franc in the wake of the euro.

At the same time, the European Union and ECOWAS countries, along with Mauritania, are negotiating the creation of a free trade area within the framework of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). The aim of the EPA in West Africa is to adapt progressively to the conditions of international trade marked by a liberalised global market in accordance with the WTO agreement. The problematic negotiations are based on the following elements and perspectives:

- The increased opening up to products imported from the European Union should benefit consumers by reducing food costs, but to the detriment of local production, which will have to compete with imported products (some estimations show that extra-regional imports of onions, potatoes, beef or poultry meat would increase by 15 to 20%[17]).
- The anticipated effects of protection for local production will only be seen in the medium and long term, which may put a strain on consumers' purchasing power and increase the risks of food insecurity in the shorter term.
- The short-term benefits of free access to the European market for West African products are unclear. On the one hand, thanks to the "Tout Sauf les Armes" (Everything but Arms) initiative, the Least Developed Countries (LDCs)[18] already have access to European markets without having to pay customs duties for any products except those covered

17. GRET (2005): *Impacts de l'Accord de partenariat économique UE – Afrique de l'Ouest*.
18. Some LDCs: Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo.

by a specific protocol. Only Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria and Cape Verde, all non-LDCs, could potentially benefit from a possible opening. On the other hand, countries exporting food products to Europe have to meet quality and timeframe criteria that they have not yet fully mastered, except in the case of certain sectors, such as fresh fruit and vegetables.

- The WTO provides for "special products" and "special safeguard" mechanisms to temporarily protect the local products that are essential to food security. At the same time, the Framework Agreement on Agriculture of 1 August 2004 requires all non-LDC developing countries to continue reducing their bound customs duties.

Faced with this complexity, West African countries are still moving forward haphazardly. Subject to differing interests, they are also placed into two distinct categories by the international community – DCs and LDCs – whose "rights" are not the same in terms of the protection of agriculture.

Recognition of "Least Developed Regions" (a new concept), would undoubtedly remove a certain number of barriers and would allow States to follow in the footsteps of rural and agricultural actors, who are becoming organised at the regional level and are increasingly influential in the definition of policies[19].

19. The West African Network of Farmers' Organisations and Agricultural Producers (ROPPA) on the ECOWAS Common Agricultural Policy; the African Cotton Association (ACA) and the African Producers' Association (APROCA) in cotton trade negotiations.

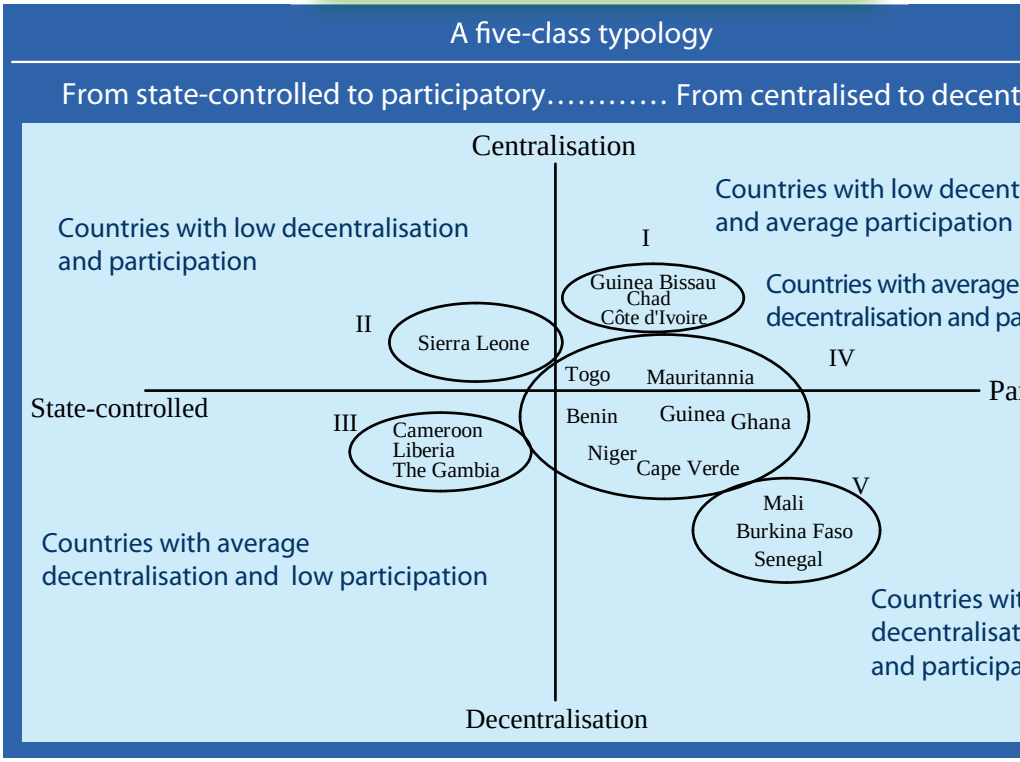
4.4 Defining Rural Development Policies with the Actors Concerned

The 1980s were marked by the implementation of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) in the agricultural sector. These policies led to the withdrawal of instruments supporting the sector (realignment system, stabilisation board), making producers more vulnerable to changes in international prices; this was even more so given that the trade policies triggered the liberalisation of trade while there was increased competition from Asia and subsidised agriculture from OECD countries. Furthermore, agricultural liberalisation encouraged the transfer of certain State activities and powers to private actors and Farmers' Organisations, which now play a greater role in the sector's organisation or in the definition of rural strategies at the national and local levels.

At the same time, rural development management has evolved towards greater decentralisation, while participatory mechanisms and procedures have also developed, either as pilot projects or as more important institutional reforms. They tend to involve local actors to a greater extent and to give them the opportunity to take part in planning and implementing initiatives concerning them. However, such practices are not widespread and there may be very various degrees of participation and decentralisation/centralisation in different countries, giving rise to five groups of

countries according to their typology (see Figure 7). While consultation processes are developing everywhere, effective participation by populations in managing their affairs often still remains at a pilot stage in many countries and the transfer of powers and responsibilities is unevenly distributed.

Figure 7. West African Decentralisation and Participation Typology



Source: FAO, Rural Development Division (2006)

At the regional level, strategies and policies are being drawn up or implemented: the UEMOA's agricultural policy, the CILSS' Strategic Framework for Food Security, the ECOWAS/CILSS sub-regional programme combating desertification and the ECOWAS agricultural policy framework for West Africa (ECOWAP). Like economic operators, farmers' organisations grouped together at the regional level play a greater role in drafting and directing these policies. Thus, the intervention of ROPPA members (West African Network of Farmers' Organisations and Agricultural Producers) in national workshops has made it possible to influence debates on the ECOWAS Common Agricultural Policy (ECOWAP). Beyond the regional level, these organisations have gained greater weight and take part in international negotiations. Some institutions have been particularly active along side the C4 countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad) in trade negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO): the African Cotton Association (ACA), the African Producers' Association (APROCA) and ROPPA.

West Africa is facing two major political challenges. Firstly, national political solidarity needs to be reinforced in order to defend the countries' and region's interests. The benefits of such action could be seen when cotton-producing countries – Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad – joined forces during the WTO negotiations. However, the same needs to be done now during the trade negotiations to be held within the framework of the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) with the European Union or partnerships with new actors, such as China, India or Brazil. How can ECOWAS countries reconcile their different interests? And secondly, more consideration must be given to complementarities between production basins and consumers' needs, as well as to the common resources shared between different regions. Strategies focused on the development of cross-border regions or basins on the basis of their comparative advantages need to be furthered.

Conclusion

Rural development policies cannot look to the past to prepare for the future, for over the last 45 years, West Africa's rural landscape has witnessed deep-seated changes. The growing population and urbanisation have turned West Africa into a regional market. Rural and urban areas, local and national levels are closely interlinked and interdependent; they have jointly entered the competitive era.

This new era seems promising, though risk-laden, in particular because the weakest rural groups (those living in marginal zones) are subject to the market's disadvantages without benefiting from its advantages. As was the case in other parts of the world at different times, the shift from a traditional agrarian economy to urbanisation and the market economy involved an increased consumption of the agricultural space and non-renewable natural resources (timber).

These changes may seem powerful and rapid, but there is no doubt that they will be even more so in the next 20 years. In 2020, the urban population is likely to represent more than 50% of the total population. A city with 100,000 inhabitants in 2006 will have 160,000 in 2025 solely through its natural growth, and probably 180,000 with rural entrants. Land will be perceived as a capital asset by a growing number of farms (perhaps more environmentally-friendly practices will emerge?). A larger proportion of farms than today will be well connected to the market and will profit from it. Farmers in marginal zones will continue to suffer from the vagaries of the climate and the market, and perhaps even more so from the impact of climate change.

Far more than in the past or even today, "agriculture" will not be the sole activity in rural areas, although it will remain the driving force. Furthermore, rural and urban areas are closely linked and their relations will become even more intense. Any development policy or strategy must take this into account.

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