



# The Right Livelihood Award

*for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people*

Bernard Lédéa Ouédraogo (Burkina Faso)

(1990)



*for strengthening peasant self-help movements all over West Africa.*

Bernard Lédéa Ouédraogo

Bernard Lédéa Ouédraogo was born in Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) in 1930. He completed his secondary education there and gained numerous diplomas before studying in France, where he obtained a doctorate from the Sorbonne in 1977.

After finishing school in 1950, Ouédraogo became a teacher and school director and then turned to agriculture, where his talents as a trainer led him to the top echelons of the civil service. But he found he was unable to help the farmers and village groups whom he was supposed to be training, so he left to find out why.

His first question was whether anything existed in the traditional society of the Mossi (Burkina's largest ethnic group) that resembled village groups. "We undertook a thorough study of village social organisation - the people's thinking and their social and economic structures - and we discovered that the Naam group, a traditional village body composed of young people, had the most highly developed cooperative characteristics. We decided we would attempt to work with the Naam structures."

The result was an initiative unique in Africa. Despite a lot of problems, the Naam groups prospered. By 1978 there were over 2,500 groups in Yatenga province with 160,000 members. Twenty years later this had risen to 6,480 groups all over Burkina Faso - almost half of them women's groups - with a membership of 300,000.

The transformation of the traditional Naam groups into modern social structures was a brilliant piece of practical sociology by Ouédraogo. He gives four reasons for their success: dynamic local leadership and activity; maintenance of traditional values; proscription of any sort of social, ethnic, political or religious discrimination; and training and motivation generated from within the group.

The activities of the Naam groups are as broad as life itself. They grow, build, manufacture, trade. As of 1999, they had created 235 cereal banks, 115 mills, 22 dams and about 300 wells. In addition

they have established 17 credit banks and constructed six cellars in Yatenga for preserving the 1,000 tons of potatoes they grow each year. The Naam groups are helped with aid funds from French, Swiss, Dutch and German agencies, but they generate their own incomes as well.

In 1976 Ouédraogo founded, with the French development expert Bernard Lecomte, the Association Six S (Se Servir de la Saison Sèche en Savane et au Sahel), becoming its Executive Director two years later. While Naam is a people's movement, Six S is a non-governmental organisation. It was dedicated to removing three obstacles to peasant mobilisation: the lack of technical know-how for coping with drought and desertification; the lack of negotiating skills to deal with government and aid agencies, and the lack of funds to implement small projects.

Six S became a federation of peasant organisations like (and including) the Naam from nine countries in the Sahelian zone. By the late 1980s, Six S was reckoned to serve over 2 million people, on the basis of a direct membership of 245,000 farmers.

More recently, Six S has undergone some restructuring. In the mid-1990s, Ouédraogo was elected Mayor of his home town, Ouahigouya.

### **Quotation**

*"The danger for many Africans is that the erosion of our ways by the aggressive ways of others, our own values by foreign values, will destroy our sense of responsibility for solving our communities' problems."*

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