

"Sufficient millet is crucial for our existence"



The Foundations partnership in Mali is moving the focus of its activities from sorghum, cowpea and millet research to enterprise development.

Bourema Diallo and his family live in a small village in the West African Sahel in Mali, about 12 kilometers from the next tarred road, which leads to Burkina Faso.

The nearest business town, Ségou, is about 60 kilometers away, and Bamako, the capital of Mali, is as much as four hours' drive away.

Bourema is a farmer - he cultivates a few hectares of land not far from the village, mainly with millet and a little sorghum, as well as maize, and he keeps cattle. As a member of the Fulani ethnic group (*pheuls* in French) - historically a nomadic and cattle-breeding people - he has more cattle than most of the other villagers, who mainly belong to the Bambara group.

In his courtyard there are a couple of dozen cattle, as well as sheep, goats, ducks, chickens, and guinea-fowl. Bourema has just recently put up a new clay coop for the guinea-fowl.

The farm has eight traditional grain silos made of clay, which Bourema hopes to be able to fill after every harvest. "Sufficient millet is crucial for our existence", says Bourema. But the harvest is not always good enough to feed the family for the whole of the following year. He has a big family, and as we speak to him they gradually gather in front of the house - his two wives, his two grown-up sons and his daughters-in-law, as well as his four younger children. Only the oldest of the four is going to school, while the others attend the *medersa*, a kind of Koran school at which both French and Arabic are taught.

The two grown-up sons have never been to school, although they have taken part in literacy courses in the local Bambara language. They work as small traders. Bourema's wives regularly collect the baobab leaves, which are highly valued due to their vitamin A content. The women prepare a kind of sauce from the leaves, which is served with the national dish of The Sahel, *tô*

(millet gruel).

"The most important thing for a good harvest," Bourema explains, "is getting enough rain." But the rains in the Sahel vary from year to year, between 200 and 600 mm. In these climatic conditions, the traditional varieties of millet only produce modest yields. Bourema is unable to use irrigation, as he lacks the capital and technical equipment - and there is a water shortage as well. To secure his harvest nevertheless, Bourema uses the farmyard manure his cattle produce. He spreads this on his fields to increase the soil's fertility. "But to get a better harvest I don't have fertilizer, which is better than manure,"

Bourema says. "Apart from that I would need tools like a plow, for instance."

"In years when there is not enough food and the grain reserves that farmers' families have are already nearly used up before the next harvest, many of the families borrow millet from farmers who have produced enough - either because they own more land or have better access to fertilizers, pesticides, or improved seed varieties," Bourema tells us. "After the next harvest they pay their creditor back - in kind, either with millet or other crops. But they don't always manage to pay the amount back in full - and then they have to sell part of what little property they have."

Luckily, Bourema has another source of income: he builds carts and beds, which he sells in the surrounding villages. But the most important thing for him is his cattle, which he regards as a kind of social security. In emergencies, he can either sell a few of them or exchange it for millet. "But I can't do that every year, otherwise I wouldn't have any cattle left to produce milk and manure," Bourema adds.

Like Bourema, many of his neighbors depend on a good harvest in spite of the sideline work the women, men, and even children do. It is very important to them to ensure soil fertility and yields in a sustainable way, enabling them to provide for their families themselves.