

Africa Report by Antonio Gaspari

Organic farming grows . . . deserts

Underdevelopment is the real environmental disaster, a recent FAO conference in Morocco proved.

A recent conference of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in Morocco proved that the advance of the African desert is due to what the Greenies called "organic farming," a practice known in the black continent for millennia: Soil cultivated with scant natural fertilizers, if it is not enriched with chemical fertilizers, gets degraded to the point of turning into sand.

The 16th annual Regional Africa Conference of the FAO opened in Marrakesh on June 11. Ministers and high-ranking officials from the 51 countries that belong to that area of the world, where malnutrition and desertification threaten the life of one out of three inhabitants, participated in the sessions, which closed on June 15.

In the keynote, FAO Director General Edouard Saouma stressed that the aims of the meeting were to find a solution to the problem of food shortages and soil degradation.

"Africa," he said, "is and remains a reservoir of raw materials; the problem is that the natural resources, such as minerals, forests, fertile land, and water resources, are used without any plans to build them back up. These resources have been used for centuries without ever being built back up, and therefore today, over 20 countries live in emergency conditions. This situation, together with the stagnating market demand, the collapse of raw materials prices and the erection of trade barriers against African products, means that the foreign debt can only grow, forcing African states to depend totally on international aid."

Saouma concluded by recalling that more than half of FAO's projects are concentrated in Africa, and more than 40% of these in sub-Saharan regions, for a total of \$1 billion invested in 18 agricultural projects.

Despite these efforts, it is evident that Africa needs much more significant aid to conquer hunger. According to FAO statistics, 35% of the African population lives below the minimum nutritional level. One in three inhabitants suffers hunger. Moreover, the number of the underfed in the last 15 years has almost doubled. In 1969-71 there were 86 million of them, in 1979-81 there were 100 million, and in 1983-85 they had gone up to 142 million.

The increase in desertification of fertile lands is growing in tandem with the number of the underfed inhabitants. Again by FAO figures, in the last 50 years just in the Saharan belt, some 650,000 square kilometers of productive land (twice the area of Italy) turned into desert. In Africa as a whole, every year 50-70,000 square kilometers of fertile land is lost by this process. This area, if it were cultivated by more modern techniques, could produce all the food needed to sustain the 600 million people now living in that region.

"These changes," says the FAO, "are encouraged but not caused by periodic droughts. It is the bad exploitation of the land which causes the desertification." The arable land is in fact ravished by primitive farming methods. The soil is robbed of nutritive substances which are not replen-

ished, since the African countries do not produce chemical fertilizers, and lack the hard currency to buy it from abroad. The soil is only fed with the few natural fertilizers available in the locality. Thus the fields become poorer every year, until they turn into sand.

Similar damage is caused by the lack of weed killers. For this reason, useless, harmful, and very resistant plants, like the *calotropic procera*, get the upper hand over crops and reduce the per hectare yield, as is occurring in vast zones of the Sudanese Sahel.

Also, the use of wood as the only fuel pushes people into cutting down forests, thus eliminating much of the woodlands, which are natural antagonists to the desert's advance.

Thus it is underdevelopment that is destroying the quality of life and the environment on the African continent, and not population growth, as the United Nations Fund for Population (UNFPA) maintained in its latest report, which proclaimed, among other unscientific claptrap: "Whatever the level of poverty or technological development, population growth remains an essential cause of the degradation of soils in most developing countries and the slowing of demographic growth will help to stop future degradation." UNFPA's prescription was simple: Kill man to save nature.

But a study conducted in 1982 by the FAO and by UNFPA itself actually showed that rational and modern cultivation of the land in the developing countries alone—not counting China—would guarantee a food production capable of feeding some 33 billion people, more than 6 times the current world population.

So, the solution is known; it is now up to the governments of the richest and most powerful countries in the world to show the will to fulfill it.