18  Dryland Cropping Systems of Semiarid West and East Africa

WILLIAM A. PAYNE
Texas A&M University
Bushland, Texas

The countries of West and East Africa have an annual gross domestic production (GDP) per capita of $500 to $2200, placing them among the poorest on earth. With an appallingly high percentage of their people living on less than $2 per day (Table 18–1), several are worse off economically today than they were in 1970 (Sanders et al., 1996; Hall, 2001). Even where wealth has been generated, income inequality remains high. For example, Ghana, which overcame economic and political turmoil of the 1980s to achieve the region’s highest GDP per capita, has nearly 80% of its people living in abject poverty, most of whom are in rural areas (Table 18–1).

Life expectancies in West and East Africa are much lower than those in developed countries, and infant mortality is much higher. Annual population increase for most countries, which are already struggling with food deficits, ranges from 2.0 to 3.0%, despite the ever growing pandemic of HIV/AIDS. Famine and war continue to threaten the region. At this writing, 6 to 10 million Ethiopians face starvation due to severe drought, two million Sudanese have been killed and another four million displaced due to both war and famine, and two million Sierra Leoneans—a third of that country’s population—have been displaced by a decade-old war that has left tens of thousands dead and countless others deliberately mutilated. Côte d’Ivoire, long a bastion of economic and political stability, risks falling into a multi-faction civil war, and Nigeria, where a quarter of the continent’s population lives, continues to struggle with a volatile mixture of religious, political, and ethnic conflict.

The relations between social and political stability on the one hand, and food security and agricultural production on the other, are much debated (Sen, 1984; Arnold, 1988) and certainly complex. But perhaps they were described most succinctly by Nobel Peace Laureate Lord John Boyd Orr, who said “You cannot build peace on empty stomachs.”

In most West and East African countries, agricultural production and food security are moving in the wrong direction. Yields, whether defined in per ha or per capita terms, are declining while the populations burgeon. In the Sudano-Sahelian zone of West Africa, for example, the yearly average growth rate of