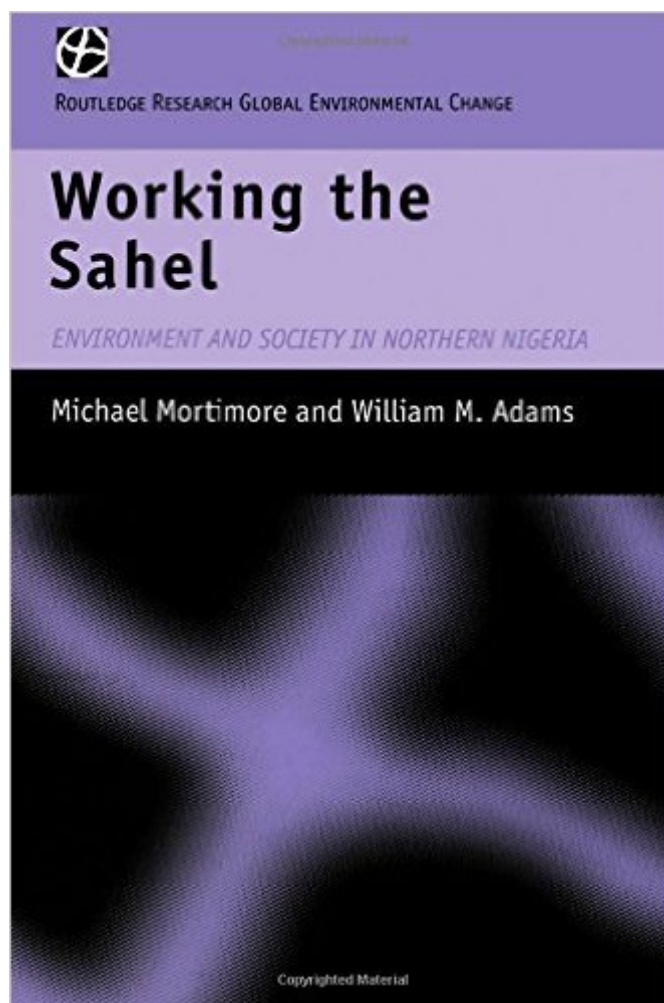


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# Working The Sahel (Global Environmental Change Series)



## Synopsis

This book looks at how people in the semi-arid conditions of the Sahel cope with their harsh environment. It draws on four years of field research with farmers in the Sahelian region and builds on work with these communities over several decades. Reporting on studies of four village communities, it shows how people work to achieve sustainable livelihoods and emphasises that there can be development without disaster.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Mortimore, a British geographer with 28 years of residence in northern Nigeria and several books to his name, is an adept and rigorous practitioner of local-level cultural ecology. Bill Adams began his career examining the fate of Northern Nigeria's large irrigation schemes, and has since written extensively on conservation and sustainability questions. *Working the Sahel* emerged from a five year British-funded investigation into patterns of agricultural intensification and labor use in four sub-locations located on a transect of varying population density between Kano and the Nigeria-Niger border. This book subsumes some of Mortimore's long term datasets and archival material, permitting longitudinal evaluations. *Working the Sahel* is a tightly focused research monograph. The key question it poses is how individual skills are exercised in "strategic and tactical" ways by households in Northern Nigeria, and how resource endowments are managed under varying population densities. The starting point is that constraints on farming activities can be

distilled into four categories; rainfall, bioproductivity of plants and soil, labor, and the availability of capital. Labor constraints in Nigeria and elsewhere have been generally relaxed as population densities rise, permitting some combination of intensification of agricultural production in-situ, economic diversification out of agriculture, and circular migration. Adaptation - a term much critiqued by anthropologists - is used quite sensibly here to describe the reflexive, longer term restructuring of Sahelian rural systems in the response to these four constraints. Both flexibility and adaptability are demanded of Sahelian farmers. The core of the book concerns the day to day management of labor. In the four villages, high frequency time-budget observations by local researchers took place over four years, initially with the men, women and children of around 45 households. The study found that some labor inefficiencies are inevitable in dryland farming systems. Short cropping seasons in the drier villages concentrate labor demand; but since crop growth is dependent on rainfall, drought years can actually provoke labor surpluses. To maintain flexibility, therefore, labor is matched to resource endowments, and by switching between livelihood activities. Women and children make significant contributions to agricultural labor, that are greater in the drier and more extensive farming systems where Islamic seclusion is more relaxed. A picture emerges of biodiversity maintained by cultivation practices, and only localized episodes of degradation, largely driven by precipitation fluctuations. In their view, "Nothing could be further from the scenario of reckless resource degradation which has been put about by some academics and development agencies" (p193). The book also argues farmers have already developed pathways to "indigenous intensification" (p97) in the drylands, where denied access to fertilizer. Adaptive responses in the four villages include significant non-farm activities, since as Mortimore and Adams are at pains to stress, risk is spread through diversification. Impelled by economic factors, such as the instabilities generated by Nigeria's commodity booms and busts, and the recognition that animals offer investment opportunities, a pattern has emerged of "the more crops produced, the more livestock kept" (p132), in mixed farming systems. Private accumulation through petty trading in rural periodic markets is just part of a widely developed trading system, and markets also provide a wide range of social functions. Long distance migration, described much too briefly in the book, articulates with broader economic opportunity in regional hinterlands, and nationally. The authors personalize some of these labor tradeoffs and decision-making processes by profiling six farmers, by means of activity charts and brief personal histories. These profiles highlight how and when households deploy their labor. The book concludes by stressing that agricultural development initiatives in the Sahel fail when they are reductionist, and ignore diversity and variability. There is a dig here at farming systems research, which has underpinned agronomic development programs in the Sahel, for its focus on

efficiency criteria. Dryland farmers are not profit or efficiency maximizers, since "...'efficiency' would leave no room for flexible maneuver" (p192). The message for future development interventions is a simple one; big schemes won't work, and "the most impressive stories of development are those where a need for multiple choices, to suit a range of smallholder families, has been met, implicitly or explicitly, in the type of interventions and opportunities affecting rural households." (p191). Politics receives too little discussion in the book, and is missing from the conceptual model used: it is only discussed as a starting point for the analysis of local farmer responses. Social and political conflict is downplayed, and not much is said about struggle and open resistance - and why such struggles (often gendered, or to do with resource access issues) might be necessary. Nonetheless the insistence on rigorous comparative fieldwork in *Working the Sahel* is salutary. The authors remind us that smallholder agriculture is potentially productive, and environmentally benign, in parts of the world where the presence of globalized agricultural knowledge, pervasive development discourses, and far-reaching commodity markets is still fragmentary. To do this, the authors afford equal analytical weight to natural environments and to human activities. The book shows the real contribution that committed geographers can make to African agrarian and development studies.

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