

# Community solutions to world debt crisis

**DEREK MacCUISH**

When Sam Djobo told his wife he was going to a conference on debt and economic restructuring, she thought he was wasting his time. These were big issues, not matters for someone like Sam, who works on local development and environmental protection in northern Togo.

Fortunately, he did make the long trip south to the capital and joined dozens of people who had come from all over West Africa to talk about the foreign debts of their countries. Some work for community organizations, some are involved in issues like deforestation, desertification and fishery management. All are engaged in grass-roots efforts to improve social and environmental conditions in some of the poorest countries in the world.

The conference brought them together in Lomé, Togo, for four days in early March. It gave them a chance to share information and strategy with each other, and to talk to representatives of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund about debt-reduction programs.

When Djobo addressed the gathering, he spoke about a crisis in Togo, which has seen a "profound deterioration" in economic and social conditions in the 1990s. The poverty and deplorable living conditions of his fellow

citizens, the lack of drinkable water, health services and education, and the absence of political freedom and personal security are part of daily reality.

He argued that foreign debt is a serious obstacle to human development, taking away meagre resources that could be used to fight poverty and build roads, schools and hospitals.

Others at the conference agreed. From the perspectives of their own work in the deserts of Niger and Mali or the forests of Cameroon and Nigeria, they shared the frustration of seeing money that could go to improving lives and protecting the environment leave Africa. The countries of Africa spend twice as much on debt payments as they spend on health care.

Yet there is a strong desire to look beyond getting some of the debts cancelled or reduced. The social activists and environmentalists at the Lomé conference want to see new forms of relationship between their governments and the international financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, and between their governments and citizens.

They want loans to be properly directed for real human development, with effective monitoring of where the money goes. They don't want to get into a situation like this again.

The context in which they work is a difficult one. Some are suspicious of

their governments, for good reason. The president of Togo, General Gnassingbe Eyadema, has kept tight control of the country for almost 30 years.

There have been reports of arbitrary arrests and executions, and the security forces enjoy impunity for human-rights abuse. Road blocks and security checks are common. The situation in the country was made clear to me as soon as I arrived, when a soldier quieted the crowd in the airport by firing off a pistol. Even the Nigerians found the atmosphere oppressive.

Togo is like a lot of African countries, caught in a steady decline. Yet the prospects for Africa will be better if people like Djobo achieve some success in influencing the development paths of their countries. They are dealing with difficult, complex issues, but they are ready to undertake the challenge.

Debt payments in Africa have become a problem for several reasons. Economic restructuring, directed by the IMF, brought currency devaluations that effectively doubled the debt. Funds were misused or stolen. Many Africans now regard their own governments and the international banking institutions with suspicion.

Solutions to the debt problem will involve a range of actions, from improving communications and access to information to developing real and sturdy de-

mocratic processes throughout Africa.

The challenge will be to find ways to reduce debt-service payments to a level that allows other spending, on social and environmental priorities, to go forward.

The World Bank's chief economist for Africa, Jeffrey Katz, was at the Lomé conference and responded positively to the proposal that debt-reduction targets be set in light of other spending needs and in the context of a solid development strategy. Now, the main criteria for debt-reduction efforts are economic, such as the ratio of debt to export earnings. They do not include social indicators.

Unfortunately, the IMF was not well represented at the conference and has not shown a willingness to consider social and environmental objectives in discussions of the debt problem.

People like Sam Djobo are not radicals. They are smart, hard-working individuals trying to advance reasonable proposals for positive change, based on their experience at the community level. Now they are ready to step forward and bring their suggestions to the international community. They deserve a say in their future.

❖ *Derek MacCuish is a program co-ordinator for the Social Justice Committee, Montreal. He attended the Lomé conference on behalf of the Halifax Initiative, a national coalition of development and environment organizations.*