

greater degree than money does. There's hardly any money, because backward agricultural countries do their essential business within the natural barter economy.

The world is getting more crowded, especially in its poorest regions. A hundred years ago, 70 percent of people lived in the poor countries. That was slightly more than 1.2 million people. Today a similar number of people live in extreme poverty, and 80 percent of humanity, or 5.3 billion people, live in poor countries. The majority live in villages, although the number of urban and rural dwellers in the world is now even. People live worst in the overcrowded, filthy cities, without the necessary infrastructure, with enormous rates of unemployment and crime, and in a poisoned environment. Most of the young people want to escape, to emigrate. They know better than anyone that it is impossible to live there in the long term. Few can hold out. Over time, they will have to get out or die.

Those who do not die remain alive in various ways. Those various ways range from misery and poverty through a middle-class existence and relative affluence, all the way to wealth and great riches. At one extreme, existence on the boundary of life; at the other, a life of total satiation. Every day, unfortunately, people die of hunger and malnutrition by the tens of thousands. Every day, as well, people wonder how to squander or invest their money. Unfortunately, there are far more of the former than of the latter. While some, the few, live from project to project, from deal to deal, from one great political event to the next social gala, others, a great many, live from morning to night. Others still, also a great many, live from one paycheck or harvest to the next.

The area of Niger is twice as great as that of Texas or four times as great as that of Poland. It lies partly in the Sahara and partly in the Sahel, on the boundary between the desert sands and the somewhat more productive land to the south. Thirteen million people live there. The poorest 10 percent has an average annual income estimated at 10,700 units of the local currency, the CFA. This is about \$22 per person at the official exchange rate, or \$76 at PPP.

Among the more than a million people at this income level are the eight members of Sani Barre's family. Their entire annual income, the outcome of statistical analysis and their own hard work, is equal to \$600 in terms of purchasing power, which is a concept that no one here understands, and why should they? Here it simply means 86,000 CFA or about 235 CFA per day for the whole household. They seldom see

money, however, because the village has a predominantly natural economy. Nevertheless, the relationship between goods and money has been flourishing recently. The waves of globalization have even been reaching here, in the form of needs originating far away. There is a need for their labor, because it yields products that are in demand elsewhere.

Sani is thirty-five and his wife Fatimata is thirty-four. She has given birth to seven children, but one died at birth and another before turning five. They also have Fatimata's sick mother to look after. She is fifty and has trouble getting around. She doesn't have much longer, because no one has very long here. She is the only one in the family who can read a little, but there is nothing to read. None of them can write. However, they can draw, especially the children. They can even draw a rhino, which no one here has ever seen.

There might seem to be an excess of children, but this is not true. It's better that way, because there will always be someone to look after the parents in their old age, just as Fatimata is caring for her mother now. Old age is just around the corner.

They live in Okedede village in the Air Mountains, a lovely basalt mountain range and plateau covering an area as large as Switzerland. On the horizon is the endless Sahara. A stone wall, resting on sand, surrounds their homestead, and offers at least a hint of protection against the frequent high winds that blow sand into people's eyes. The Polish proverb about the wind always blowing into poor people's faces could have been coined here.

In one corner of the yard is a little flock of eight chickens, and in the opposite corner are three goats, under a roof on sticks. A nondescript dog, thin but cheerful, plays among the pack of children. Unlike people, dogs can always be cheerful, even when the poverty grinds them down their whole lives long. The one-room dwelling stands at the back of the yard, to the right. The walls are stone, with a mixture of desert vegetation and sun-cracked clay stuffed into the cracks. The roof is made of fiber-cement board, but there are houses nearby thatched with branches dragged here from the savannah.

The house is almost unfurnished aside from a beat-up plastic cabinet, a scratched mirror, and some hooks on which a couple of pots and some clothing hang. Modern conveniences, as they say elsewhere, are completely absent, unless we count the hammock, and an oil lamp that smokes terribly. On the wall is a yellowed Air France calendar, from the year 2000. It shows the Eiffel Tower. If you stacked up all the houses

from the three nearest villages, they wouldn't reach to the top of it. In the yard there are two beds, made of boards, covered with blankets older than anyone in the family, but without mattresses. The fireplace is outdoors, in front of the house. In the fourth corner of the yard, there is nothing. Holding her second-youngest child, who tries in vain to suckle at her sagging breast, Fatimata can go over to the wall there and chat with a neighbor woman returning from the desert with a bundle of dry sticks on her back.

Half the people in the village are younger than fifteen. No one is over sixty. Aside from the homesteads, there is nothing here except for a small, attractive mosque, renovated and painted a pale spring-green color, with a graceful minaret. It is only slightly larger than the village houses. A dozen or more kilometers away is a larger mosque, with a Koranic school attached. That is a big thing: as the children copy out verses from the Koran on their tablets, they learn to write. They learn in Arabic, but also pick up Hausa, which is more important than French here, along the way. With Hausa you can make yourself understood at every marketplace. The mosque and the school were built with financial aid from Saudi Arabia.

And then there's the shop. What this means is that one of the houses has a window facing the road. It is hung with every imaginable kind of merchandise, and stays open from dawn until night. There are matches and candles, canned beans and tins of sardines, peanuts and bundles of dried hot peppers. There are always tea and sugar. There is some kind of colorful sweet drink in clear plastic containers. There is Coca-Cola, too. Everything is at room temperature. We are in the mountains, so the temperature is only 85 degrees Fahrenheit. There really isn't much merchandise here, but 8 kilometers away, at the Thursday market—tomorrow—they'll have everything. Tomatoes and peas, chicken and goat meat, material and towels, plastic buckets and tin teapots, sweet mangos and figs, oil and soap, crayons and notebooks. They also have Chinese flashlights.

We get up at dawn, with the chickens. A couple of village roosters begin crowing when the sky is still dark. Everyone who has the strength to do so gets up. No one dawdles, because days are short all year long at this latitude, never more than two hours longer than the nights. You have to fight to survive. It's a slow struggle. Everybody goes their own way, without emotion. The chickens wander wherever they please. So do the goats, but it's a good idea to shoo them to a place where they can

find something to pluck at. The Sahel is no alpine meadow. These goats make life possible; they take care of themselves and eat almost anything. They give milk, and when they can't do that any more, they make it possible to have a little meat once a week for half the year. The goats are a matter for the children, that is, for those old enough to have stopped clinging to their mother's only skirt. They don't go to school, so there's a lot of time, right up to dusk. At night, you sleep. You sleep a long time because the evenings are short without lighting, and, besides, you're tired. Why wouldn't you be?

At dawn, there is no breakfast, but the children get a piece of hard-tack each, and a tomato to share. Fatimata wraps her youngest daughter, Leilat, in a scarf (imported from China) and slings her across her back. Leilat looks very frail. Fatimata places a wine-skin sewn from goat leather (a local product) on her head, along with a plastic cup (manufactured domestically), and heads out to get water. The well is not close at hand. What that means is that, this year, it is 3 kilometers each way, because the nearer ones are dry. Other women are also on their way, making everything chatty, colorful, merry, and lively. There they go. They'll be back in two hours. It'll be after eight then, but it won't be oppressively hot yet. That is when the women and the children will eat their meager morning fare.

Other women go to the fields. They're not very big, more like garden plots. Stones still need to be cleared away here and there. That's a good thing, because the stones come in handy for reinforcing the low walls and the houses, but only the heavy ones, and they have to be carried because there aren't enough wheelbarrows to go around.

The fields are like fields everywhere. There are both women and men there. Sani grows onions. Others grow carrots, or a few tomatoes, but most of all there is millet. There is nothing more. Life without millet is impossible. And onions! They said they needed onions. They even came in motor vehicles and gave instructions on how to plant and weed them. There aren't many weeds here, because few things grow at all. The onions, red onions, the best ones in the world, grow. They keep nothing for themselves. It's all for export. They always take a few onions to the market, but those go for export, too. Every so often a couple of men show up with mules. Some of them, the rich ones, even have camels. They take the onions away in sacks. They take them down to the road, to the pickups. From there big trucks take them farther. In the village, no one knows that "farther" refers to the capital, Niamey,

and that airplanes take them from there to France, or even farther. That's how good the onions are. Yet no one here knows where they go. They know that it's beyond the desert, but the desert has no end. Or they've even heard that it's beyond the equally great water, but how is it even possible for water to be great?

As long as there isn't a drought or floods from violent rainstorms, things are okay. It's better in the dry season and worse in the rainy season. Then there's less work and more time, and what is there to do? When it pours down rain, there's not even anywhere to go, because the house is crowded when everyone's inside. The worst thing is when the locusts attack, as they did last year. They eat everything. Just like goats, except a goat won't eat a person, because you can drive a goat away. Not the locusts.

Yet perhaps the worst thing of all is when the local wars and border conflicts come here. At such times, more people die than are born. It's a nightmare. It's a good thing that the borders are distant. Here all borders are dangerous. The worst ones are with Mali and Algeria, but the ones with Benin and Libya are almost as bad. Niger can't agree with any of its neighbors except Cameroon about where the border is. It was the French and the English who drew those lines on the map.

All the work in the fields is handwork. There are no farm machines, although there is irrigation equipment, but it doesn't work because there's no money to buy diesel fuel. You have to use a hoe. The rainwater fills up the holes, and you pump it out by hand. It's unfit for drinking, but just right for watering plants. It's pumped into wooden troughs, and from there ingenious chutes carry it to the left and right, among the rows of crops, just like 1,000 years ago.

Fatimata comes to the fields at eleven. There is a twenty-four-hour supply of drinking water at home. It's enough for everyone, because they don't need much. Nobody bathes very often here. You have to wash sparingly. Fatimata has given her children and mother their first meal and now brings her husband his portion. The plastic bowl contains a kind of African pap made of millet soaked in water mixed with goat milk. This is the African equivalent of corn flakes. There's added sugar, because it's healthy that way, and you need a source of energy. It's easy to eat if you don't eat anything else. You get used to it.

Sani remains in the field with his onions until late afternoon. Fatimata returns home. It will soon be two o'clock. The sun is beating down. It's necessary to sit in the shade, but there isn't much of it. Fortunately, an

acacia tree growing near the road casts a bit of shadow into the yard at this time of the day. Fatimata sits there with one of her friends to have a lunch that consists of a few peanuts and some tea with sugar.

It is time to clean up the yard. With the goats and the chickens, there will always be dirt. She keeps it clean, really clean, with no litter. There's not much to do in the room, except to sweep and tidy up, and help her mother. There's no toilet here, but people must do what is necessary. Others run to spots far away from the village, but old people don't have the strength. They need help—either to lead them outside, or to clean up.

The children, along with the goats and the dog, are in other yards. They're all over the place. The older ones are in the field, because there's work to do. The middle children spend hours walking around near the village, gathering branches blown on the wind so that they will have something to cook the evening meal with. It's always worth checking the window, that is, the shop. They might have new merchandise. Sometimes they do. There are hairpins, lighters, mirrors, and plastic containers. It doesn't look as if anyone is buying anything, but the shop stays in business.

It's getting chilly, because it's late. It's getting dark. On his way back from the field, Sani stops at the mosque for a moment, squats down, and bows his head to the ground, facing east, toward Mecca. It's his fourth prayer today. He prays for Leilat, for his family, for his village, for the Air Mountains, for everyone. The day after tomorrow is Friday, so there will be more people here. It is a holy day. Once again, he will be able to pray for everyone.

The village is buzzing. The farmers have returned from the fields. The goats are home, too. It's not clear who led whom, but perhaps it was the children leading the goats, because the goats are full and the children are hungry. They dropped in during the day for their pap, and now it's time for more pap—couscous. It's made from millet, served with carrots and cooked in a pot over the fireplace. To give it some flavor, a little paprika has been added, just enough. Sometimes Fatimata manages to add an egg, but not today. Tomorrow is market day, so she'll need to sell a couple of eggs. A few CFA will come in handy. She'll be able to buy batteries for the Chinese flashlight, which hasn't been working for a couple of days now. And she'll need more for sugar, peas, and perhaps some second-hand clothes for the children.

It's evening. People are meeting up, chattering, and joking. After all, there's so much to tell about! They sit on the sand near the fire. No one drinks alcohol, and few smoke. However, all the grownups drink strong, sweet tea in tiny glass cups. The men talk business; they talk onions. What's making the merchants with the mules so stubborn that they don't want to pay more? You can see the men's eyes sparkling when they say that the merchants with the mules will be ready to haggle when they learn about the other buyers, the ones with camels.

If there's no demand, they can't sell any more, or at a higher price. The demand for local goods—natural resources and human skill—must stimulate supply. Isn't that how it works? They won't come, not the ones with the mules and not the ones with the camels, unless there are enough onions. So the supply of local goods and services must stimulate demand. Isn't that how it works?

Well, if they had a little more money, then they'd have to decide: a cart, or a wheelbarrow?

The evening doesn't last long, because it's dark and they need to be thrifty with their wood. There's so little of it here. It's time to sleep, on the beds outside the house or on the ground. Inside are only the old lady, sleeping in the hammock, and two of the children on the earthen floor. When the last of the fire stops glowing, you can see the myriad stars sparkling in the sky. Only here, in the Sahel, can you have stars like this on less than a dollar a day. This must be total darkness, not only in our village, but within a radius of dozens of kilometers, and total silence. That's what it is.

Another day has passed, and passed fortunately. There's no drought. Swarms of locusts are not flying their way. Unfortunately, there are few such days. All of them are times of hard work, of the struggle for survival, of the lack of any prospect beyond simple reproduction. Children are the only new thing that comes along. There are also bad days, when people cannot cope. You can keep going around and around within the same horizon, but you can't live on nothing. There are many days full of troubles and misfortunes, of not enough to eat and no strength, of sickness. But the most important thing is that no one fell sick today, and no one died. Leilat will die on Sunday.

The Barre family created and consumed a gross income of \$1.60 that day. They even managed to save a bit, in the form of two chicken eggs for the Chinese batteries. For their hearty hospitality—for the African

pap, the couscous, a mat in the courtyard, for watching the camel, for the fires of home, a guest from a far country left them 10,000 CFA. For him, that is not quite 60 Polish zloty, or about \$20, but for them it is as much as their income for today and the rest of the month. It's enough for them to buy a new lamp and a three-month supply of oil.

They manage from day to day, from market to market, from one visit by the merchants with mules to the next, from rainy season to dry and back again. They spend a lot. Their marginal propensity to consume is equal to 100 percent, and their marginal propensity to save is equal to zero. They accumulate nothing, invest nothing, and eat up everything. If you do not invest, you stagnate.

Before them are more days like this. This is as good as it gets. In Niger, they live an average of no fewer than forty-four years.

So how does one live with a per capita income of more than \$2,000 a day? We are not talking about billionaires, but about millions and millions of people. Taken together, they expend \$2 or \$3 billion a day. They have big problems, because it's impossible to keep spending at that rate, which means that they have to save. Because those savings quickly turn into big money, they have to invest. That's always stressful. Yet no matter how much you spend, you've always got more. Is this the source of the old proverb about how you can't buy happiness?

Switzerland is a small country. Its mountainous area is a little less than twice that of New Jersey, or a mere 13 percent of the area of Poland. Its population is 7.5 million, with an average income of \$35,000. Among them are 750,000 people with an annual income at the level of 160,000 Swiss francs (CHF), or about \$133,000. That works out to 440 CHF, or \$365, a day. Within this category is a subgroup of about 50,000 people with an income of over 850,000 CHF, or \$733,000 annually. This is more than 2,400 CHF per day—about \$2,000. There are also a few thousand people with an income on the order of 8.5 million CHF, or \$7.3 million, which means 24,000 CHF, or \$20,000, per twenty-four-hour period, because at this level, you're making money around the clock.

Franz Lendenbaum and his family live in a sixteen-room house with lovely grounds in the exclusive Seefeld district of Zurich. Franz is forty-six, and his wife, Ruth, is forty-two. Their two children attend the most elite of private secondary schools. They have several domestics. The English governess, a native of Oxford, looks after the two daughters' English accents and drives them to school. The French cook comes

from Provence. The driver, in keeping with the fact that they own a Maybach, is from Germany. The gardener is local, and the two bodyguards come from Italy. They are Sicilians.

Franz gets up at six. After swimming a hundred laps in his pool, he has breakfast: muesli with skim milk—a kind of European pap, without sugar, because it's healthy that way—and toast. At the table, he joins an intelligent conversation with Ruth, a successful oculist at a private clinic, and the children. How are things in school? "Cool," they say in English. They both like asking their teachers hard questions. What's up at the clinic? There are lots of patients. They all want to see what's going on in the world around them.

It's time to go to work. In the car, he listens to the morning news on Schweizer Radio and skims the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. That's enough newspaper time for the day, because too much clutters up the mind. He occasionally looks at a magazine at home. He's in his office by a quarter to eight. It's supercontemporary and elegant, with a stunning view. After briefing his secretary, he briefs his personal assistant. Both women are Swiss from head to toe. There are many technical details to cover, and all of them are important. The meetings begin at nine. For the first one, he has called in the market analysts, department heads, and the financial director. Business is great. Franz is president and majority shareholder in a company that uses high, or, more precisely, the very highest technology to produce and service custom-made equipment for enriching uranium. The company is unrivalled, in global terms, in processing uranium from the deposits in Niger. It also offers sophisticated consulting services, which often makes it necessary to fly to various places. He flies not only to Washington, Moscow, Paris, Vienna, and London, but also to Beijing, and even to the Middle East and Africa. Most frequently of all, he flies to Niamey in Niger.

There are times when he even manages to stay on for the weekend, as he will do a few days from now. He will rent a helicopter from a French company and make at least a short hop into the sublime Air Mountains, so different from the Alps he sees every day. A helicopter for two days, a hotel in Agadez, a jeep, a guide, camels with their tenders, and so on comes to a total of 4,500 CHF, a pittance for so much pleasure. There's the atmosphere in Agadez, where Jack Nicholson dies in a little hotel in Antonioni's *The Passenger*. They wanted to know why he was interested in who was selling arms to the Tuareg rebels, which wasn't any of his business.

Franz has a Ph.D. in nuclear physics from the prestigious Zurich Polytechnic. Ruth holds an M.D. from the university in Basel. She earns about half a million Swiss francs a year, but that's her business. She has to buy herself a new car every few years, and her current one is a Jaguar XJ. That's pocket change. Zurich ranks at the top of every survey taken among the business elite on the best places to live. It's also the most expensive, at least in terms of women's apparel, jewelry, and cosmetics. Beverley Hills is cheaper. Even in Zurich, however, you have to go shopping—not because it's cheap, but because it's a good way to run into friends. In a single day, an elegant woman like Ruth can spend several thousand francs on clothes and perfume. Fortunately, she doesn't do it every day.

Phone calls, e-mails, and videoconferences with partners take up the rest of the morning. In this business, the bigger or more important matters are settled face to face. You have to travel, and you have to receive visitors. Today there are three of them. They come from another country and are very important. If there's demand for the company's goods and services, then there must be a supply. Isn't that how it is? Or could it be that the wonderful supply means that there's never a shortage of demand? Isn't that how it is?

Time for lunch: Today Franz joins a friend from the Polytechnic who keeps an eye on what's happening in the field and kindly shares his knowledge. He's also a physicist, but a theorist. He's wasting his talents in academia, so he likes to keep in touch with practical matters and show off in the business world. They have lunch in the Haus zum Rüden. All the waiters are native-born Swiss. This is a place where even someone from Liechtenstein would be considered a Gastarbeiter. It's a light lunch. The best choice is a French dish of foie gras served with incredibly tasty rings of red onion. Where does that onion come from? The chef says that it's shipped in fresh from France, and that the French import it from Niger. It's the best in the world.

Lunch is on Franz's expense account, which means, because he owns the company, that he's paying. The wine was almost as expensive as the onion, and the bill, together with the tip, comes to 200 CHF. Back where the delicious onion comes from, that would be the equivalent of 81,000 CFA. Here, one onion, sliced and presented on a plate, costs as much as what Sani gets for ten sackfuls. Those who buy the sacks from him turn a tidy profit, and those who import them to Europe realize a 300 percent annual return on their capital. It's like the East India

Company in the seventeenth century. After all, “trade, not aid” is the basis of development, isn’t it?

The lunch costs the equivalent of the Barre family’s yearly income. At the moment, Franz has no idea that the Barres even exist. If he did, then what? Switzerland was also a poor country once, and it pulled itself up by its own bootstraps, just as Franz worked hard for his own company, and for his own money, and it all comes down to partnership, honesty, reciprocity, and liberality. He pays his taxes. Out of these taxes, Switzerland assigns \$1.7 billion, no less than 0.43 percent of its GDP, for foreign aid. Some of that aid takes the form of the services his company delivers to the governments of some developing countries in the field of the peaceful uses of nuclear technology.

After lunch comes a meeting with a representative of a consortium of banks financing a discreet operation. This is not a business that craves publicity. You have to get along with the media, but it’s better if they don’t know too much. Franz prefers to steer clear, because rash commentaries cause more trouble than they’re worth. Nevertheless, some media need to be cultivated, and questions are being raised this afternoon about a country that someone has recently placed on the wrong axis.

After another series of professional exchanges with staff about complex technological issues, it’s time to head home. After a few last exchanges of private gossip on the computer, he leaves, stopping along the way to pick up a 2,300 CHF suit from Zegna and to look in at the Maserati dealer, because it’s time to decide: Maserati or Lamborghini?

The dog, always ebullient, meets his master at the threshold. It’s a Doberman. Dogs are always cheerful, even when they’re rich. How are the children doing at school?

Supper is at home. It’s Wednesday, the traditional day for a visitor. This time it’s a friend of Ruth’s from Berlin—nothing formal, but you have to take care of guests and show them a good time.

Supper is served in a spacious salon overlooking the Zürichsee. A concert Bechstein stands in one corner, just in case one of the daughters decided to become the next Martha Argerich, although the girls have other ideas. On the wall hangs an original Warhol, and there’s some Tiffany glass in view. In the opposite corner are Bang & Olufsen speakers, and Vangelis’s *The City* is playing. The drinks table to the right holds the best brands. There is Armagnac, and Dalmore single malt. To the left is a suite of Nicoletti chairs, a sofa, and a table on which *The*

National Geographic, *The New Yorker*, *The American Scientist*, *The Economist*, Le Carré's *The Mission Song*, and Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* may be discerned.

Franz sits late in the evening at the computer, alone in his study and with his thoughts, until midnight. He is mostly thinking about the company, the competition, political aspects, risk, finances, technological advances, and his staff. He has little time for himself or for his family.

One more glance at the markets—the Osaka exchange is opening just as New York closes. As to what's happening in Zurich, everyone knows without making any special effort. What he does not plow back into his own firm, he invests on the exchange. "At market," he says. He doesn't do so personally; he has his people. He only keeps an eye on things, simply out of curiosity. Never, as a matter of principle, does he invest in companies in his own field. Then he'd have to pray for others to prosper—for the competition's profits to rise! Let others pray for that. He prays for himself, his family, his company, for Zurich, and for Switzerland. Soon the holy day will come, and when all of them pray together for themselves, it will be just as if they were praying for everyone.

Who could add up what he spends daily? Yet if you add up all the fixed and one-time outlays, it comes to something in the neighborhood of 10,000 CHF. That is, more than \$2,000 per person. It's a day like any other. In the course of it, the Lendenbaums created a gross income on the order of \$20,000. Here, however, people calculate things in the long term, strategically, whole years at a time.

They spend little, because their marginal propensity to consume is a mere 40 percent, which leaves a 60 percent marginal propensity to save. They accumulate a lot, invest a lot, and eat up little of it. Those who invest develop.

Before us are more days like this. This is as good as it gets. In Switzerland, they live an average of only eighty-one years.

So it is that some—a multitude of them—live in extreme poverty, which does not mean that they will automatically and always be unhappy. Others float along in abundance—a few of them—which does not mean that they are always happy. One important thing in all of this is the fact that there has been a fundamental rise in income levels over the last few decades, although it is a shame that this does not apply to everyone. The most numerous are all of those in the variegated middle ranges. They are varied, because being in the middle is also a relative