



Source: Saouma, 8 May 1980, photographer
Hans van Dijk / Anefo

SAOUMA, Edouard Victor

Lebanese agronomist and sixth Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) 1976-1993

By **Michael D.V. Davies** · Version 15 January 2013

Was born 6 November 1926 in Beirut, Lebanon, and died there on 1 December 2012. He was the son of Victor Youssef Saouma, trader in nutritive products, and Evelyne Tyan. In 1951 he married Ines Forero-Ramos. They had two daughters and one son.

Biography

Saouma was born into a Maronite Christian family in Lebanon. He went to school in Beirut and trained as an agricultural engineer at the School of Engineering, St. Joseph's University, Beirut. He received his degree in 1949 and left for France, where he studied for a diploma in agronomy at the National School of Agronomy in Montpellier, graduating in 1952. In 1951 he married Ines Forero-Ramos, a Colombian. In 1952 he returned to Lebanon and was employed by the government at the Tel Amara Agricultural Experimental Centre, where he soon became director and oversaw its integration into the Department of Agricultural Scientific Research of the Ministry of Agriculture. He continued his domestic career as Director of the National Centre for Farm Mechanization (1954-1955) and as Director-General of the National Institute for Agricultural Research between 1955 and 1962. It was at his instigation that the Department of Agricultural Scientific Research became the autonomous Agricultural Research Institute of Lebanon in 1964. While holding this national position he came into contact with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as he represented his government in the FAO Conference and Council between 1955 and 1961. In 1960-1962 he served as

an elected member of the FAO Programme Committee and concurrently as member of the Board of the Lebanese National Grains Office.

Saouma's exposure to FAO resulted in his securing a position as Deputy FAO Regional Director at the Office for Asia and the Far East. He was posted to New Delhi from 1962 to 1965. This assignment was followed by an appointment as Director of the Land and Water Development Division of the Agriculture Department of the FAO in Rome. During his tenure as Director of this Division (1965-1975) he oversaw the publication of the *World Map of Soil Resources*, a joint publication by FAO and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) undertaken between 1971 and 1981. The increasing environmental consciousness at the time also affected the United Nations (UN). Saouma led FAO's delegation to the UN Conference on the Environment in Stockholm in 1972. He was also responsible for running the International Fertilizer Supply Scheme, which funded purchases of fertilizer for those less developed countries most severely impacted by the 1973 oil crisis. During his period as Director of the Land and Water Development Division he was also responsible for one third of FAO's operational field programme, mostly comprising soil surveys and irrigation schemes. In 1970 Saouma briefly left FAO to become Lebanon's Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, but after one year he returned to FAO and his former position. His resignation and governmental position allowed him legitimately to cultivate the regional contacts needed to support his eventual candidacy for Director-General, as staff members were not permitted to campaign for the post. He resigned in 1975 in order to stand for the post of Director-General. Charles Weitz (1997: 29) notes that this election was the 'first major penetration of concepts and techniques of "electioneering" in the UN system'. Nothing had come close to Saouma's long-term strategy: 'the years of careful prior planning, the injection of money in very important amounts, not from the candidate's country but from other states in the region with financial capabilities, and the uses to which funds were directed' (Weitz 1997: 29).

In November 1975 the FAO Conference elected Saouma to the post of Director-General, for a six-year term beginning 1 January 1976. He inherited a sickly organization. His predecessor (1968-1975), Addeke Boerma, had been a weak and vacillating Director-General, leaving behind him an organization with no guiding direction, a bloated bureaucracy and labour problems. The 1974 World Food Congress, held under the auspices of the UN, had stimulated the creation of two potentially competing organizations, the World Food Council, a policy body, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), a development bank focussed on agriculture and rural development. The World Food Congress had also produced a conflictive climate which polarized North-South ideologies, but this worked in Saouma's favour (Marchisio and Di Blase 1991: 82) as he was elected to his first term with the active support of members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Arab League and the Organization of African Unity. Initially welcomed as a reformer Saouma moved swiftly to reassert FAO's presence in developing countries, particularly by setting up FAO Representation Offices, thereby breaking with the tradition that United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) offices would include a FAO Senior Agricultural Adviser. In 1981 FAO had 55 of these offices covering 66 countries. Against the wishes of the major budget contributors but with the majority support of the developing countries, he also funded a Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) from regular, assessed budgetary resources. This new Programme supported small-scale projects with limited financial implications, but each project was subject to Saouma's approval. However, it was not long before suspicions arose that TCP was being used for more than altruistic objectives and these suspicions gained strength over the years.

Saouma's commitment to FAO and agricultural development cannot be doubted. During his first term, Saouma focussed the organization on three principal objectives: food security, rural development and agriculture's relationship with the environment. Building on former Director-General (1956-1967) Binau Sen's concept of a basic right to freedom from hunger, Saouma proposed in 1979 that the FAO Conference adopt a World Food Security Compact declaring food security to be a shared global responsibility (which was eventually adopted by the FAO Conference in 1985). In support of this FAO

commenced monitoring national food supplies to provide an early warning system of crop failures and in 1979 it published *Agriculture Towards 2000*. This study projected the future growth of world agricultural production and concluded that intensive application of technology and research would be needed to achieve reasonable growth. Further steps towards this objective involved FAO in advancing programmes that supported small farm productivity and incorporated intermediate technology. In 1979 FAO also convened the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in Rome. The result of the conference, which advocated broader and more secure land ownership, was a double-edged sword. It publicized the problems involved in rural development but its recommendations concerning agrarian reform were ignored by those countries in which the elites had a vested interest in the *status quo*. Finally Saouma believed in the need to protect the environment while at the same time increasing agricultural production. In particular this resulted in FAO becoming a strong advocate for conservation of and common access to plant genetic resources. In the same vein FAO developed a global code of conduct regulating the safe use and ethical marketing of pesticides and adopted a World Soil Charter (1981) which set out principles for the long-term optimization of land resources with a view to improving the productive potential of the land.

Being the only candidate, in November 1981, Saouma was nominated for a second term (1982-1987). The start of this term revolved around a request for a large increase in FAO funding, however this was opposed by the principal budget contributors. Yet Saouma secured the backing of Australia, whose key vote in the FAO Finance Committee gave him the majority he needed to push through the budget. In return he supported the nomination of the Australian James Ingram as Executive Director of the World Food Programme (Ingram 2007: 170), a nomination which was the joint responsibility of the UN Secretary-General, at the time Javier Pérez de Cuellar, and the FAO Director-General. This appointment would come back to haunt Saouma as Ingram took up his post in 1982 with the full intention of reforming WFP and altering its relationship with FAO (Ingram 2007: 1, 66). Within a year frictions arose with Saouma and the relationship continued to disintegrate throughout Saouma's second term, finally breaking down in 1991 when the member states forced FAO to cede greater independence to WFP.

Saouma's second term also saw a tightening of budget resources available to FAO, particularly multilateral funds sourced from UNDP and the World Bank. Donor governments had shifted their priorities towards bilateral programmes in the face of their own budget difficulties at the time. Additionally, there was resistance to the New International Economic Order, advocated by the G77 group of developing countries and supported by Saouma. The UNDP funds flowing to the FAO declined gradually from 25 to 18 per cent of UNDP resources. This initial decline coupled with the change in relationships with WFP has, over the succeeding years, resulted in FAO ceasing to be the largest UN specialized agency and in WFP becoming the third largest operation in the UN system after the UN itself and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The immediate consequences were that Saouma's TCP was made a more flexible tool with an enhanced political dimension and that the FAO commenced a search for increased bilateral funding of its field projects.

At a more technical level Saouma's second term saw an increasing focus given to the problems of food production in Africa. In 1983 FAO alerted the world to the burgeoning food crisis in the Sahel, which eventually required massive injections of food aid. It also set out to rehabilitate African agriculture through devoting a greater proportion of the FAO budget to Africa. The 1984 World Conference on Fisheries Management and Development in Rome was another FAO milestone conference which advocated greater self-reliance on the part of developing countries in exploitation of their fisheries resources and in particular the development of small-scale fisheries and aquaculture. Although the conference was unable to resolve the political issues surrounding the exploitation of fish stocks it did identify the problems and initiate discussion of future directions. The

results of the decennial *World Food Survey* were published in 1985 and a year later an expanded FAO statistical database (AGROSTAT) became available to support the agricultural community.

Saouma's third term (1988-1993) was his least successful and, in common with many other long-serving executive heads, reflected tiredness both of the person and on the part of governments with 'business as usual'. Generally donor countries had resisted his re-election, opting to support the African Moise Mensah, then Vice-President of IFAD, in his stead. The consequence was a further tightening of FAO's budget and the beginning of its long-term decline. There were a dearth of initiatives in his third term and those that materialized were often dependent on third-party support, such as the 1991 Conference on Agriculture and the Environment organized by the FAO and the Netherlands and the 1992 Joint World Health Organization-FAO Conference on Nutrition.

In contrast to his technical achievements, politically and managerially Saouma was more controversial. With the possible exception of Amadou-Mahtar M'bow at UNESCO (1974-1987) and Jacques Attali at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (1990-1994) Saouma attracted more negative press and governmental criticism than any other executive head in his time, for instance in comments in Graham Hancock's *Lords of Poverty* (1989), a case study in betrayals of public trust, and in articles in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* in 1992-1993. From the outset Saouma had an acute sense of his own self-importance (Abbott 1992: 41) and would not move around FAO's headquarters without a security detail, justified by the somewhat remote possibility that as a high-profile Maronite Lebanese he could be a target for extremists. As time progressed, his management style became more dictatorial and his influence more malign. Increasing autocracy resulted in an outflow of talented and experienced staff into early retirement, which had an adverse impact on FAO's primary objective to fight global hunger. The year after his first election he had persuaded the FAO Conference to change the Director-General's conditions of appointment from a non-renewable six-year appointment to one which could be renewed for an unlimited number of six-year terms. He then single-mindedly aligned his efforts to ensuring that he could secure re-election. To this end he started using TCP projects to ingratiate himself with key constituencies. He offered posts in the secretariat and as FAO Representatives to his political supporters and used the rapidly expanding network of FAO Representations to boost his visibility (Abbott 1992: 11).

While he tolerated true technical debate, his arbitrary manner prejudiced staff morale. For those in direct contact with Saouma, the expression of a contrary view could be interpreted as a personal affront or disloyalty (Abbott 1992: 41, personal interviews in 2007) and he could be quite vindictive in return. He politicized the staff of the organization, often intervening in appointments at the lowest professional levels. As part of his approach to control and self-protection he incorporated the audit function directly into his own office and appointed as Auditor-General a person who was beholden to him personally, having been an administrator in the Land and Water Development Division when Saouma headed the division. He used the audit to persecute those who crossed his path, although not always successfully. In one notable instance a respected Division Director, who had stood up to him, was accused of corruption and removed from his post only to be re-assigned to an equivalent position when, after two years, nothing could be proved against him. He also threatened Ingram with audit investigations of WFP on more than one occasion (Ingram 2007: 76, 247). In 1984 Ethiopia experienced a severe famine. The continuing conflict with WFP and a personal resentment of the position taken by the Ethiopian Representative to the FAO led Saouma to make a mistake that was costly to his reputation. WFP had proposed sending 30,000 tons of food aid which, as was the case at that time, Saouma had to approve. He delayed the decision for three weeks (Ingram 2007: 197), although FAO claims it held up the request for no more than ten working days (Lydiker 1988) and this added further ammunition to Ingram's case for more independence from FAO. What happened is most authoritatively described by D.W. Georgis (1989: 154), who was Head of the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission.

The majority of FAO member states had tolerated Saouma's style at the time of his first re-election in 1981 but by the time the second came around in 1987 a 'Camberley group' of donors had decided that leadership change was needed and aligned their support behind the highly admired Mensah of Benin. Led by Canada, a major donor to WFP that was concerned over the WFP-FAO conflict, they believed that they had strong governmental support for their candidate both in Africa and Asia. However they were out-manoeuvred by Saouma, who managed to split France off from the group and who intimated that Mensah was a puppet candidate (Weitz 1997: 34). The French in their turn exerted their influence in Southern Europe and Francophone Africa in support of Saouma. Working in Saouma's favour was the fact that the vote for the Director-General is made in secret by those attending the FAO Conference, rather than by governments in their capitals. Thus, there was no way of knowing if delegates voted for the candidate chosen by their governments, which may have allowed less than scrupulous government representatives to vote for the incumbent, in anticipation of future favours (Weitz 1997, Davies 2002). In the end, although Mensah made a strong showing, the election turned on 18 votes and Saouma was re-elected for a third term.

The struggle for re-election had seriously polarized opinions and Saouma seemed to lose his hitherto sure political footing. Major budget contributors, particularly the United States (US), accused Saouma of mismanagement and withheld assessed payments squeezing the FAO budget (arrears reached 197 million US dollars by 1991), while collaboration turned into confrontation. Staff morale deteriorated at an increasing rate, so much so that even 15 years later it was considered that several current problems could be laid at Saouma's door (personal interviews in 2007). Overall, despite his technical competence, Saouma left the FAO in a worse state than when he took over. The situation was compounded by his successor, Jacques Diouf, such that FAO is now a shadow of what it was at its peak. Saouma kept a low international profile after leaving FAO, only participating as a member of the UN High-level Advisory Board on Sustainable Development (1994) and as a sponsor of *Rencontres internationales du Mémorial de Caen – Prevention des Conflits*.

March 2025: on p. 1 The 'Agriculture Department' added to his 1965-75 tenure as Division Director

Archives

E.V. Souma's documents and some audio fragments can be found in the FAO Corporate Document Repository, available at www.fao.org/documents/search/en/?sel=IGF0dHJfdHNfdGloOGVJbmZvX3RpdGxIOiJzYW91bWEiIA%3D%3D, and in the historic archives of the FAO Newsroom Audio, available at www.fao.org/audiocatalogue/index.jsp?lang=EN&category=5

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