



Zinder, Niger, July 2012

“They say that Africa is a country of paradox.

Potentially rich in natural resources and a veritable reservoir of raw materials for major powers, its people are among the poorest in the world. Today, malnutrition has slightly declined in Africa, agriculture struggles to adopt modern farming methods and grain production is in a free fall,” indicates the 2012 Annual Report of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) on human development. The paradox lies in the fact that the country possesses sufficient resources to overcome the current situation.

But what do the major powers really want?

The UNDP report underlines the particular vulnerability of the food system in Africa. Average precipitation has decreased over the course of the last decade in sub-Saharan Africa more than any other region worldwide, doubling the number of people affected by drought, heat and forest fire. Flooding, storms and mass migration have nearly tripled. Among agrarian shortages directly related to climatic shocks, armed conflicts, and the like, UNDP cites a slowdown in child growth and a reduction in scholastic education. This situation can cause more than a 10% drop in lifetime revenue.

Climatic changes put 75 to 250 million persons at risk in a growing water crisis, warns UNDP. With Africa being vulnerable to international market fluctuations, inflation in 2007 and 2008 gave a sharp rise in poverty. Households under the poverty line use between 54-90% of their revenue for food. With an estimated population growth of 856 million in 2010 to 2 billion by 2050, it is imperative that Africa confront the growing alimentary demand through an annual 2% increase in food production, a more significant percentage than anywhere else in the world. The report indicates that sub-Saharan Africa can only maintain its current economic revival if it succeeds in eliminating the famine affecting nearly one-quarter of its population.”

### **Sustainable alimentation in Zinder**

Planting that was done following the relatively light rains could come to naught due to a water shortage if steady rain does not fall. In some areas, however, rainless planting does work.

There is a lack of pasture in the countryside, characterized by grazing lands that are weak in nutritive value. The network of water points is in a poor state.

Animals are often taken to drink at the wells, pumping stations and village boreholes. Water prices have doubled in Zinder as the town struggles to provide drinking water after months of drought, forcing a large part of the population to use abandoned or contaminated wells. For past few weeks, the children have suffered from diarrhoea, which has caused death by dehydration. Adults have been affected more recently. Many animals have perished, and we were warned by an unofficial source that more than 6,000 sacks of rice originating in Spain were refused by customs officials in Ghana for containing Melamine.

Official warnings were issued but the rice swiftly made its way to Burkina Faso, and then to Niger.

Dishonest businessmen more interested in their bank accounts than human lives came up with the idea of pouring the rice into new bags, and that rice is now on the shelves in local markets.

### **Niger's migratory crickets**

The first swarms of crickets were reported in Arlit, northern Niger, on May 31. The locust grasshoppers come from Algeria and Libya and are the product of a winter-spring breeding process that produced a new invasion in both countries!

If migratory crickets are not destroyed very early, they reproduce rapidly and migrate to farmland. They will destroy at least 1,235,530 acres of crops and 2,471,053 acres of pasture (yes, Niger is an enormous country in the Sahel region of more than 1 million km<sup>2</sup>!) And it has been hard enough to reap a harvest because of insufficient rain these past years.

The need for pesticides is most urgent, but to what extent will that pollute the ground and the crops already growing?

### **Girls back to school**

The seventy street girls and child-mothers being educated at the Association school wrapped up their final weeks of classes before a three-week summer vacation! Ramadan began and I let school out since everything works in slow motion during that time, a time when no one eats from sunrise to sunset. It is becoming more and more challenging to purchase food at market, so I opted to give the students a break and then travel home to Switzerland. I returned for the new school year and the building of the Education and Development Centre end of August!

The girls were given an evaluation test to place them in their respective scholastic, sewing and knitting classes! Two full days of silence and concentration ensued. Every subject in Niger's scholastic programme was given, and I look forward to sending in the result lists with remarks from both teachers and sponsors from Switzerland and beyond!

The girls worked hard and are excited to be able to learn and grow alongside their schoolmates at the *Au Coeur du Niger* School!

How adorable it is to watch a "big" girl (10-12 years) take a new arrival (8-9 years) under her wing! She explains how sandals are to be left by the door before entering, talking or getting up during class is not allowed, that on Friday morning you have to line up to receive your hard-boiled egg!

One morning at dawn, a grand-mother came to the school gate with her two orphaned grand-daughters of 6 and 7 years. I listened as she told me how their mother had passed away just one month after having given birth to the second child, and how their father had died one year later of fever. No money, no health care, they suffered and died in silence.

Naturally I enrolled the two little girls in school that very morning, and they have already received a uniform, soap and onions.

I always verify a story when new girls arrive at the school. I visit their hut and check to see that the truth has been told. Sometimes I have to go down small, sandy paths to get there, muddy with a nauseating liquid blend of excrement and dishwater and heavy with agitated mosquitoes and noisy flies. These, of course, are the source of cholera and malaria.



Association schoolgirls and child-mother babies! In the background, chicken coop and sheep pen!

## **Aïchatou has lost her father...**

Little Aïchatou lost her aging father to Hepatitis B two weeks ago. Her father had been bed-ridden in silence and pain until Aïchatou told me how sick he was, but how he didn't have the money to pay for medical care. I suggested that she bring her father to the Sisters' dispensary the next morning to be examined and cared for. But he died that very night, his body ill and worn.

Aïchatou's own health quickly became an issue, as did that of her pregnant mother. Both tested negative for Hepatitis B; what luck!

A few days later, Aïchatou's elderly mother began to feel unwell and I paid a visit to her banko and straw hut. She was going into painful labour two months early, and with no time to get her to the dispensary, the baby was going to be born in the hut! In solidarity, neighbourly women quickly arrived to offer their help. A few hours later, her tiny baby was delivered stillborn at seven months. We can only surmise that the loss of her husband and the shock of being left alone to care for seven children and an unborn child brought on the premature birth.

Aïchatou and her mother received their June food distribution, and she is very happy to have this opportunity to attend the Association school and help her dear mother and siblings.

## **Sewing room for the mothers of our schoolgirls**

An aluminium room (I learned my lesson with termites) was built in early June on campus to offer a place for the schoolgirls' mothers to learn sewing with and without sewing machines, knitting, reading, arithmetic, basic hygiene and health, natural family planning, etc. They are so happy to come every morning from 9 – 12, with or without their youngest child. Many of them cannot attend the courses since they have many children at home and no one to watch them (often 3 – 8 children in addition to the child attending our school). Grandmothers are also unable to attend as some of them are blind, others losing their eyesight.

## **New farm and garden**

I am pleased to announce the building of a small chicken coop and goat pen on the campus of the temporary Association school! For a month now, eight nanny goats and one buck for them to share live happily in the open air of their pen, where they graze and gambol to their heart's content! Let me reassure you that our goats are not attached by foot or neck! One of our nanny goats is already expecting her first kid, and a few provide a bit of milk, which is used to make a mid-morning porridge for the girls!

Of the twenty chickens that were supposed to arrive at the school, three did not survive the journey from Maradi, which is roughly 350 km from Zinder. Travel conditions were too tight and the heat was unbearable, reaching 48°. If you could see the conditions in which animals travel in Africa you would be astonished! They have a (very convenient) way of stuffing livestock (and people, I assure you) on any little thing that moves!!

It took five full weeks for my seventeen surviving chickens to calm down and provide a single egg every two days. Being able to distribute a hard-boiled egg every Friday morning to each schoolgirl and mother attending the sewing or knitting class in the aluminium room beside the schoolhouse is a recent phenomenon. What joy comes in seeing the girls line up smallest to biggest, agitated, mischievously awaiting their warm, freshly cooked egg!

Side note: the very cook who boils the eggs succeeded in feeding me tiny black, albeit boiled, insects last Friday with my meal of rice and black beans. It was only after having swallowed 4-5 spoonfuls that I noticed the black spots in my brown rice; a closer look proved that I had eaten “protein” that had not been on the menu of the day. An entire colony of insects had set up camp in this month’s sack of black beans, and the cook hadn’t noticed a thing? I keep telling myself that it was high time I eat a little meat! Trying not to think about it, I concentrated on my rice, my brown rice; sometimes it’s better not to know what you’re eating. The idea that you might be reinforcing your immune system is wishful thinking, indeed!



Left, chicken coop; middle, kitchen; right, goat pen!

### **Contracting work on the *Après-demain* Education and Development Centre**

With our building, plumbing and electrical plans completed and approved by my volunteer contractor in Switzerland, the architects in Niamey were able to draw up a list of five local and Niamey companies able to undertake the future construction work (memories from the well digging cascade)! A limited call to bid was extended to all five companies, each of which submitted an official cost estimate on Saturday, July 7<sup>th</sup>.

A notary, the head of Local Services for the City of Zinder, two representatives from the architectural office in Niamey, an Association educator and I participated in the official opening of the sealed estimates starting Saturday morning, divided into two groups so that two companies can work simultaneously on the project, thus advancing more quickly. The first group was mandated with the more significant buildings, administration, dormitories, school rooms for girls and boys, the second with the exterior wall and outbuildings, such as the guard post, latrines, kitchen, chicken coop and goat pen.

A brief and amusing anecdote to show how Africans think about time: our notary was about to unseal the offers when he received a call (his cell phone had rung a number of times already). To the impatient person on the other end of the line he says, “Yes, yes, I’m coming. I’m on my way!” 2 hours and 15 minutes later, he finished up with the offers and was ready to meet with the person who had been trying to reach him earlier! Inch’Allah!!

It took all Saturday afternoon until midnight and Sunday morning to compile a bid list of the five local estimates, labour and material charges included. We concluded relatively quickly that one Zinder company filled all our requirements for group 1. We contacted them to inquire as per the traditional discount given, after which we were able to take our final decision! The same company had been hired just two weeks earlier for laterite work on the road leading to the future *Après-demain* Education and Development Centre and for excavation of the site!

Determining a contractor for group 2 was a bit more difficult, but by 8:15 pm Sunday night we had it wrapped up. Two companies had failed to provide the requested official documents (bank guarantee and reports), and one had already been contracted for group 1. It was not easy to choose from among the two remaining companies but after several phone calls and business conduct inquiries, I was able to make my decision and smooth the feathers of one contractor who hadn’t yet been signed on.

Monday I began signing contracting agreements, and the companies have begun preparing for construction work to begin as soon as Ramadan was over, in August! I keep reminding myself of the well project last year, hoping to prepare myself for the huge construction site! I look forward to giving you updates as things unfold!

### **The termites are back!**

The termites took over the fort, thinking that the Association container would be a great place to explore and feast. A few sewing machines and wooden tables were still inside, and the insects decided they would be a tasty snack for their tiny, if not very vital, jaws! Fortunately I discovered them just a few days after their invasion and purchased what they told me was an efficient insecticide. I asked an educator to spray the product all over the wooden floor of the container while wearing a mask; it was 62° C inside! Outside the mercury had capped at 46°C for the past three weeks.

The result was fantastic; by the time night fell nothing was moving or living inside that container. My joy was doused just days later when I learned that getting rid of termites isn’t as easy as that! After hours of work on my computer, tired from a long African day, I went to bed around 11 pm. As I arranged my files back in the cabinet, what did I see but my little termite friends, this time gnawing away on the wooden shelves! They had determinedly and ingeniously forged their way along the iron bars, paving their way of red earth, dangerously approaching my clothes and papers!

I was instantly awake; how could I sleep with so many eight-legged, gnawing, salivating creatures so near my bed!? I’m lucky to have an iron bed and mosquito netting, but truly you have no idea how many species of things can crawl on you when you sleep in such places! On second thought, don’t think about it!

I was up half the night cleaning and taking my things out of the cabinet. I asked the night guard to help me sweep the little corpses that I had killed with a kind of “Raid” insecticide spray

(normally intended for mosquitoes, but it worked in this case, too!). My sincere apologies to animal protection activists, but I just couldn't deal with this any other way...

As you can tell, the days go by each in its own way. You never know what might fall on your arm or your head on any given day! The best thing to do is to have your most beautiful inner music playing as you go about your daily and nightly tasks.

I am so grateful to be here experiencing the things I am at the very heart of all that is Essential; here with the orphans that make it possible to live my life in the most passionate way, to share, to give everything I have within me, to liaise between you and this world. Thank you for your trust and interest in the humanitarian cause in Niger! I hope your summer is wonderful and that you enjoy your holidays!

Isabelle

Zinder, Niger, July 8, 2012

[www.aucoeurduniger.ch](http://www.aucoeurduniger.ch)

*“If you desire change in the World, change society,  
If you desire change in society, change Man,  
If you desire change in Man, make him want to change.” A. Einstein*