



Niger Zinder, August 2020

The new kindergarten and an addition to the infirmary!



The new and spacious kindergarten

February - June 2020: the ideal time to imagine and build new premises for the children at the Centre kindergarten. The more than 40 little ones, aged between 3 and 5 years old are, for the most part, the offspring of girls who work in the sewing room and of former students at the Association who are now married. These children are excited to have a large space for playing and learning about life!

After a few days of work at the Centre last March, Frédéric, our technical helper on the Association Committee, meticulously supervised from a distance the follow-up and finalisation of work on this new nursery and addition.

Good and constructive exchanges were had by Skype, e-mail, message and telephone with the new local employee hired last March, in charge of all technical and logistical aspects at the Centre.

Abdourahamane takes his work very seriously. He is conscientious, calm and quickly identifies defects or small renovations and improvements to be made in our infrastructures.



Infirmery Addition, June 2020



Inside the new kindergarten building

The pastel blue colour chosen for the two new spaces brings calm and serenity to those who enter. Sick pupils and young girls can rest and heal in peace in this new infirmary, which provides good ventilation and airing, thanks to the 200m² of solar panels installed in 2013 on one of the buildings.



Three beautiful slides in the colours of the sand, the sun and the heat of Niger are now the delight of young and old alike!

Frédéric and our technical manager still have some work to do to improve and increase functionality and safety at the Centre.

Given the growing number of students, girls and staff, it became necessary to consider building an additional septic tank. The three existing tanks are no longer sufficient for everyone, as they are wont to overflow and need to be emptied often and rapidly by truck.

An addition to the Centre sentry box is also under way. In view of the very delicate situation at the moment in Niger, we are in the process of extending the current guardhouse in order to ensure greater safety.

Last April, a motorbike was stolen from the car park in front of the Centre, where the staff parks motorbikes and scooters while at work. In order to ensure physical and material security, we had hired a local security company to provide day and night guards. But since last year, I have no longer been satisfied with the services this agency provides. I asked them to intervene several times and change out some of the guards, but this was never done.

Following this motorbike theft, and due to an obvious lack of professionalism and vigilance on the part of the guard inside the sentry box on the day of the theft, I decided to terminate the security contract and hire another company, with whom we will be even more demanding and vigilant.

Most of the motorbikes that are stolen in Niger are used for attacks and smuggling. Very few are recovered.

The extension of the guardhouse is directly linked to the surveillance of the guards. By staying in front of the Centre to carry out their work properly, they will be protected from the sun which reaches 45°- 50°, from heavy rains, sandstorms and any other hazards of Zinder's climate.

Situation in Niger – Covid-19 and Safety

As of March 13, 2020, the Government of Niger had adopted and published a list of 26 measures following the arrival of the novel coronavirus in Africa. A curfew in Niamey was enforced for the night, land borders were closed until August 1st and all public schools had to be closed indefinitely (schools reopened on June 1st), in addition to social distancing and travel restrictions. For a very long time, we saw little information from the media on the health situation in Africa, compared to the extensive, all-day reporting on Europe, Switzerland, Brazil, the United States of America and others. To date, no one at the Centre has fallen ill. The girls in the sewing department have made cloth masks for pupils and staff, traditional soaps have been used to wash hands at every entrance and exit, and morale has remained high, without too much alarm on either side.

Many Africans, including the population in Niger, consume the plant Artemisia annual (annual mugwort) on a daily basis, which grows quite easily in arid areas. It requires very little water once it is well established and it is very easy to grow. This plant loves full sunshine and does not need rich soil. Artemisia has many properties: it is a very effective anti-malarial and destroys the parasite responsible for the disease, plasmodium, which circulates in the blood. The whole plant is used in Niger, as in other countries, as an infusion against high fevers and malaria, among other things.

It would seem that Artemisia also has virtues against this virus, considering the small number of people affected in the region, and knowing that this population has always consumed the plant regularly and for natural therapeutic purposes.

The health system being weak and with limited screening capacity, the population can only pray; those who can afford it and do not depend on local petty trade to feed their families follow the State instructions as much as possible.

Border closures block trucks, often for several days. "Food shipments are rotting in the back of vehicles stranded between Senegal and Mali, or Niger and Chad," says Alexandra Lamarche (Senior Advocate for West and Central Africa at Refugees International). The situation is likely to worsen by the end of October, when the rainy season turns the Sahelian roads into impassable ponds. As for the pastoralist nomads, the impossibility to access the transhumance corridors, which often cross state borders, is a threat to their financial survival. Many animals could not be sold on July 31st, the Muslim feast of the sheep, Tabaski, an essential source of income for pastoralist households.

The closing of borders also leads to competition for access to fodder and water. "Even without Covid-19, West Africa was going to suffer from a lack of pasture, but with the restrictions on movement, the situation is getting worse," says Coumba Sow. "When animals suffer, people suffer even more. "Tensions between pastoralists and farmers, already high in the region, are likely to lead to further local conflicts in the coming months. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger already have 1.3 million IDPs due to inter-community and terrorist violence.

"This impact on hunger is structural. The crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic has only accentuated it," says Jean-François Riffaud, Director General of Action Against Hunger. "It raises the question of the capacity of States to guarantee a minimum level of protection for their citizens. Seeds are difficult to access, in the hands of large groups, all prone to speculation. We must protect this universal common good. The current pandemic shows that our global food system is dysfunctional. It could feed the 800 million people who are starving if we didn't waste 30% of what we produce. It is only through a more localised response that we will be able to accompany populations towards food sovereignty."

Ms Lamarche says that the security responders Operation Barkhane or the G5 Sahel have huge budgets with regard to food aid. Last May, the WFP (World Food Programme) estimated that some 4.8 million Sahelians needed emergency food support. It is now believed that these figures have doubled or even tripled.

Is the novel coronavirus worse than world hunger?

Unfortunately, I have not been able to return to Niger since April, due to the closure of land borders and airports in Niger. I work every day with my operational team at the Centre via Skype, and encourage the children as often as possible - even from a great distance! We all miss each other!

This is the first time in 11 years that I've stayed so long in Switzerland! How I've appreciated my time here!



It was certainly predestined, because in March, the painter who repainted a few of the classrooms and new buildings had the kind and beautiful idea to give us an amusing surprise! He painted me on a wall of the new school complex! So, though I have been away from the Centre for a long time, the children and staff know that I am always well among them and attentive to what is going on there. If they're missing their founder, "Auntie Isabelle", all they have to do is go up to the first floor of the school complex!

It does seem that I won't be able to go back there anytime soon, even though I was in the process of getting ready and rejoicing about my return.

Attacks on humanitarian aid workers in Niger.

A horrific attack took place on Sunday, August 9th against six young French men and women who had joined a French NGO, and two Nigerian employees.

They were all killed about 60 km from the capital Niamey by armed men who had come by motorbike through the bush and who seemed to be waiting for them. They had planned to visit the protected giraffe park near the capital on their arrival, at the end of their quarantine. Most of the victims were shot dead and a young woman, who had managed to escape, was caught and had her throat cut.

The judicial and anti-terrorist prosecutor's office in Paris is in charge of investigating the execution of the French in Niger. The bodies were repatriated and a ceremony was held in Paris.

After this barbaric attack, the whole of Niger was put into a red zone: formally advised against travel. Prior to the attack, the country was in the orange zone: not recommended unless there was an imperative reason to visit.

I feel a deep sadness for them, for the families, for the French NGO that brings so much aid to Niger and other countries.

I was not always understood by Swiss people accompanying me in the field. They found me to be strict and demanding when it came to following the rules of conduct surrounding daily life in Zinder and in the capital Niamey. After this tragedy, I am more convinced than ever that these rules and discipline are necessary and must be followed rigorously. I always remind the few people who accompany me to Niger that guidelines and respect for local customs allow us to work in safety, to be credible and respected in return, and to last as long as possible in a very difficult and unstable environment.

I am convinced that the basis for any change in a society and in the world in general is education, schooling and training, so as not to leave all these young people and adults on the edge of the gap. They will be tempted and pushed - in the absence of other swift government solutions - to join terrorist groups that will continue to attack the population, the army, and now the humanitarian workers.

More than ever, children and young people need education and supervision, followed by professional training that enables them to project themselves into the future and take their destiny and their wealth (those raw materials available in immense quantities in these African countries) in hand!

I dream of children who take themselves in hand and build their own futures with confidence and a smile.

I dream of solid and honest policies, of governments that replace massive corruption with a functional, humane and efficient administration.

I dream of infecting as many people as possible with the virus of fraternity, sharing, altruism, love, honesty, authenticity and humility.

It is said that Africa could be the emerging continent of the 21st century. I hope so with all my heart and I also dream that among the hundreds of children and young people at the Centre, a small 10% of them will participate and nourish this vital change.

In the meantime, the children strive to create, with their beautiful coloured pencils, an image of their Africa for sponsors, while teachers write end-of-year notes on school report cards! I hope I will soon be able to bring these beautiful and colourful papers back in my suitcases and resume sending good news to the faithful and generous sponsors from Switzerland and elsewhere; to bring back some of the innocent smiles and hope, and continue this beautiful human adventure with and for the children!



Upcoming Events

Wednesday, October 7, 2020 at 8pm
Hôtel de Ville in Romont

10th Association General Assembly

Fall and Christmas Markets: Pending authorisation due to the coronavirus pandemic
Ursy - Villaz-St-Pierre
Semsaies - Romont



Thanks to your generous and precious support, today and tomorrow are better for all these children at the *Centre de la 2ème chance*, in the Heart of Niger!
Thank you very much!

I wish you all a wonderful summer, take care of yourself, enjoy every moment and please stay healthy!

With my warmest and most grateful thoughts, and the cheerful and hopeful smiles of the 330 children and young girls,

Isabelle Macheret

Founder
Au Cœur du Niger Association

Zinder Niger, August 2020

www.aucoeurduniger.ch