

## ***The Lake Chad Woman!***

Believe it or not one of the things I enjoy doing, is working with grassroots women, Yes, women living in rural communities, who fetch water from the streams, whose children travel miles away to get to the school usually under the tree facing the headmasters house, women who do not have primary health centres talkless of hospitals in their communities. Women who start work at 5 am and really only sleep for 2 hours on a good day and never sleep on bad days, women who travel between villages to get firewood and spend all their time in the farm or on water fishing just to ensure that the family and children are not hungry, women who have several biological children and trying to give happiness and hope, women who amidst every difficulty still manage to put a smile on their faces and say I am fine, *thank you*. Women who with nothing try to take their produce to market on every market day, women who have never and may never be consulted on how to resolve conflicts in the Lake Chad and other similar places, but surely know more than anyone else, women who may never sit in an air-conditioned office and reminisce. Oh yes, I get a lot of inspiration from these women. They do not know donors, philanthropist, rich man or



poor man, they are simply happy, **their strengths know no bounds**. They cannot be perceived as weak as that is failure, their endurance levels cannot be measured with any stethoscope; they are simply happy, infact, very happy. They seldom vote as no-one includes them in any policy formulation and even if they have to speak, no voice may be loud enough. Their lives are fun and they have an answer for everything. They design their guidelines and it makes them happy. They are happy, very happy. When I appear clueless and panicky, they remind me that life has to go on and in this situation all I need to do is ABC. They will say - It happened one day, not too long ago, but all we did was this and this and now we cannot even remember, it is gone.

Sometime in May 2015 we were tasked to travel several kilometers away to inspect a hotel. We were about to launch a stakeholders platform and wanted to do things differently. My team and I felt it was time to take workshops to the community, the main place and reason for LCBCs existence. As in the words of one of the founding fathers way back in the 60's where he said 'Our Dream for a Lake Chad is about to turn into reality'. We started the journey with Al-amine Mohammed Abba Seid and Suleiman, our driver through the rocky, sandy road to Bol. We left N'Djamena at 9:00am on a beautiful Monday morning; hardly did I realize that the beauty was yet to come. As we drove along the bumps and clay, through the shrinking Lake Chad, we saw many animals but the animal that struck me the most were the pretty Gazelles. Gazelles in my region are regarded as the symbol of elegance and no wonder, beautiful women are called 'Gazelles'. The eyes, the nose, the long neck and long legs are so pretty and the way it runs shows a lot of elegance. I love Gazelles and would like to have one as a GIFT!

The mere thought of seeing the gazelles made me appreciate nature and specifically my region, the Lake Chad, even more. To share the terrain with them was quite pleasing to know. Oh enough of my gazelles and back to the primary task. We arrived Bol, the capital of the lac region at around 5pm. We stopped severally on the road to take pictures of the gazelles and some girls and women whom I follow just to understand their culture and origin. They look like gazelles and never ever want to speak with a stranger – do not know why. They are often in bright floral red round skirts, wear a lot of bangles and very large ear-rings, the girls are so beautiful and I tell you honestly I am yet to see any Miss world with their looks. They are also a mystery because they live around their camels and I have never had an opportunity to see their men! Not even a baby boy, strange but true! When I travel along the Lake Chad on the eastern side (jumping at every opportunity as it comes) I always stop and take pictures with them, they are also Gazelles...

Upon arrival we were received by the community people, a warm welcome I must admit as many of them were preparing for the Magrib or dusk prayer. We pulled off by the side of the Bol main mosque; many of the men doing their wudhu came and welcomed us. Only one of them knew who we are because he recognized our number plate. This again is another sign to prove the hospitality of the Lake Chadians. A warm welcome to a late traveler has always been the words of wisdom, from our grandfathers to children, Lake Chadians want you to know that there is enough land and resources for everyone and you are always welcome to share.

This makes me remember the letter Al-Amine shared with me sometime ago - In the words of the Shehu of the Lake Chadians, Shehu Elkanemi of Borno to Sultan Mohammed Bello in January 1824 Dated 23rd of Rabee-ul-thani, 1238; (Corresponding to January, 1824) where he said *“Hence, the cause of writing this letter and the purpose of its lines, is to acquaint you that the bearers are English travelers; whose nation, out of all the other Christians, has maintained with the Mooslemeen uninterrupted treaties of religious amity and friendship, established since ancient periods, which they inherited from their forefathers and ancestors; and on this account, they penetrate into Mooslemeen countries whenever they please, and traverse all provinces and lands in confidence and trust, without fear. They came to our country, sent to us by our virtuous and accomplished friend, the Lord Yousuf Pasha, master of Tripoli, to see and delight themselves with the wonders of the Land of Soodan, and to become acquainted with its rarities, as lakes, rivers, and forests (or gardens) ; equal to which are seldom seen in other countries.*

*After having accomplished their wishes, in seeing all the things that the land of Barnooh (Borno) and its environs contained, they felt anxious to visit your country from what they heard of the innumerable wonders therein. I have, therefore, permitted them to proceed on their journey, accompanying them with letters which explain their object.*

*You are well aware of what is stated in Alcoraanic sayings upon the subject of the obervance of honour, dictated by our Lord, the Apostle of God; and that the true Mooslemeen have always avoided shedding the blood of Christians, and assisted and protected them with their honour. Be then attentive to these travelers, and cast them not into the corners of neglect; let no one hurt them, either by words or deeds, nor interrupt them with any injurious behavior: but let them return to us, safe, and may the high God bestow upon you the best reward for your treatment to them, and insure to us and to you the path of righteousness for conduct in this life.”*

Where else may one receive such an acceptance with honour if not the Lake Chad region? Oh wait, let me just include how he started the letter - *Our salutation, accompanied with affection as strong as the odour of musk, and as perpetual as the movement of the globe, and with the mercy and blessings of*

*God, be unto you.* My goodness did you read that, how more proud can a writer be? To the precious Lake Chadians be the Glory, the land of Toumai...

Anyway, we were received honorably by our own brothers, without knowing we were theirs. The next morning and this is the important part, after completing my task I decided to get some inspiration before I return to N'djamena. Then I asked, where are the women? I need to acquaint myself with them. As relaxed as the men were, they invited over 35 women from various walks of life to talk to me. I had planned a simple, short chat with them but I was sure we will soon bond and exceed the time limit. I was right as none of us wanted to leave, we were sharing experiences and discussing true conflict resolution and transformation strategies. These strategies are not any any Harvard or oxford textbooks but in their heads ready to be implemented. They told me many things and designed the roadmap and action plan with timelines effectively. At this point I noted their expertise in what they were talking about cannot be found anywhere else. They know their terrain so well, they know the people very much, they had their conflict mitigation strategies and they had a detailed participatory monitoring and evaluation tool. In short they appeared on top of their business. They did not have a budget to discuss, or resource mobilization strategy, they simply had their vision and wanted more followers. They were clear and confident and reiterated severally, we can put an end to insurgency, all we need is space. They talked about a community engagement plan not known in any Centre of Excellence, they talked about a sustainability plan not known by the UN or the World Bank, they simply had their plan. One question to them, is why then are you not pushing forth your plan but they informed me that at our level we are doing what we best can and no-one has brought anything new. One interesting topic we discussed was the shrinking Lake Chad and mitigation steps they had. They informed me that the Lake shrinks at different intervals and this is really nothing to worry about and the climate has also changed since the creation of earth. They do not see a need for COP 19, 20,21,22,23 and so on. No, they already have their resilience strategy which they devised because they are on the field. It amuses them when they hear that there problems are discussed in another country by other people whom have never and may never feel or see the true impact of climate change. One woman pointed at a boy and told me that there exists some fishing techniques which he will never be taught as he may never see the lake above a certain level during his lifetime. A very old woman in the team, whose family predominant occupation is fishing, informed me that she does not have the skills to go out fishing when the water is as low as it is now, so she engages her grandchildren and great grandchildren to fish nowadays. Surely, the Commission has a lot to learn from the women in its IWRM, Yes, there is a lot to learn...

When I see people fighting, manipulating, constructing and fabricating just to get to a place where does not belong to them, I ask myself, for whom and for what, as you are still a step below the Lake Chad woman for which I feel honored when called.

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