

Betty Plewes

To Timbuktu *and Back*



A meeting in Léré: The author (right) and the Secretary of the Herders' Association

Last month, for the second time in 18 months, I landed in Bamako, the capital of Mali, a large landlocked country in West Africa.

Mali—home to the fabled Timbuktu, an ancient trade and Islamic learning centre—has rich historical, cultural, and spiritual traditions.

Carvings from Mali's many ethnic groups are found in museums around the world, and Malian musicians such as Ali Farka Touré have international reputations. It is also one of the poorest countries in the world, with a life expectancy of 42 and a vulnerability to climate change that scientists predict will raise temperatures and reduce rainfall.



Bambara Chiwara headpieces (masks) at the Art Institute of Chicago: female (left) and male

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Although Mali has much to offer travellers, I was not there only to see the sights. I am on the Board of Directors of ACORD a pan-African social justice organization working in 17 African countries. For more than 30 years, ACORD has worked in Mali with pastoralists, the nomadic livestock herders who live in arid areas, moving with their herds to find water and pasture. Pastoralists make up about 10 percent of Mali's population and are among the most marginalized and vulnerable people in the country.

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In the Timbuktu and Kayes areas, ACORD supports local organizations who work with pastoralist communities, helping them improve their daily lives by increasing access to water, education, and credit. They also help strengthen their political voice by supporting pastoralist organizations that represent their interests with various levels of government. In 2007, for the first time several pastoralist leaders presented themselves as candidates in legislative elections.

In November 2006, I made a 3000 km round trip to visit the ACORD program in the Timbuktu region. On the first day, after leaving Bamako we sped along on a good



Members of the Credit Union in Cabera

tarmac road past millet and sorghum fields and many plantations of watermelon. Most of these fields used to grow cotton but with prices so low, people have stopped growing cotton.

Early the next day, as we left the tarmac, the ride became rougher and the landscape dotted with baobab trees was stark and beautiful. In the late afternoon, we reached the Niger River, which flows 4300 km through five African countries and is an important source of water to Malian farmers and herders. We boarded a small ferry to cross the river and after a short drive, arrived in Timbuktu on the edge of the Sahara.

Although Timbuktu is a fascinating city, we were headed for Léré a Tamasheq village about 500 km to the west, close to the border with Mauritania. Our first stop was to meet 22 members of a women's banking



Amadou Secretary of the Herders' Association

co-op in the town of Cabera. The co-op has 153 members who contribute to a revolving loan fund from the profits of their agricultural activities. Having their own organization that provides access to credit has improved the women's economic situation, given them new roles in agriculture, and increased their confidence.

A striking difference is that as an organization, they now have access to irrigated land to grow rice, something previously not permitted to individual women.

One enthusiastic participant told us, "Now, men give land to women because they have understood that with women earning more, the entire community earns more."

After this upbeat meeting, we continued the journey, sometimes following a barely perceptible track across the sand. When we arrived in Léré, we were taken to a house, seated on carpets on the floor in a large living room, and served a meal of rice and mutton.

This was our first real encounter with the desert people, the Tuareg. They wear a blue or black turban

covering all but their eyes. There are other ethnic groups in the village and, in the late afternoon, a meeting is called to talk with a group of herders who have just returned from an exchange visit with a cooperative of herders in a town about 600 km away.

As their words are translated from Fulani or Tamacheq to Bambara to French, we learn the group was very impressed by the quality of the pastures and wells they had seen. They also note that although the cooperative is made up of four different ethnicities, they all work together. These kinds of exchanges help spread new ideas more quickly among people in remote areas as they learn from others who live and work in the same environment.

Later, as the full moon rose, carpets were spread on the sand, musicians and dancers arrived, and we were treated to a *mechoui* under the stars. It was a magical night.

The next day we met an organization of pastoralist women in an encampment on the outskirts of the town. Their main economic activity is selling milk and they are looking for ways to improve its preservation and to have better access to markets.

They also produce excellent leather products. When asked how they first organized their group, they said they became aware of the importance of organizing when they were in refugee camps in Mauritania. There, ACORD taught them how to read and write, how to do leather work, and how to organize, and they have carried on together now that they are back in Mali.



Tuareg musician in Léré

On the long drive back, we were able to reflect on what we had seen—the many different ethnicities in Mali who live relatively peacefully together, the tremendous knowledge of people developed over many years on how to live in a harsh land, the rich artistic and spiritual traditions, and the vibrant community organizations.

We really felt the truth of the statement that Mali is one of those places where there are rich people living in a poor country. ▲

Betty Plewes is the former President and CEO of the Canadian Council for International Cooperation. She worked in the field of international cooperation and development with a variety of Canadian international nonprofit organizations for more than 30 years. Currently, Betty is a volunteer member of the Boards of ACORD and Canadian Crossroads International.

For more information about ACORD, see <http://www.acordinational.org/> or contact bplewes@sympatico.ca

Credit: With notes and photographs from Eric Chaurette of Inter Pares



Pirogues (small boats) on the Niger River



A village in Dogon country