

POEMS OF
HOPE

AND PLENTY FROM THE
MAURITANIAN DESERT



STARTING OUR JOURNEY IN BELEL KOYLE

A simple tiny room with sand-colored walls in Belel Koyle, a small village of Brakna, Mauritania.

This community close to Senegal, like many others, bears today the consequences of the bloody conflict between Senegal and Mauritania from 1989-1991. At that time, thousands fled to escape violence, mostly to Senegal, where they stayed as refugees for decades.

Upon their return home, they had to face that their land had been taken from them and that desertification had shown no mercy. What was green before all around this village has turned ochre. The desert has advanced further.

The Lutheran World Federation has worked here for many years on an integrated community development program, with projects focusing on livelihood opportunities, adaptation to natural disasters and peaceful coexistence between returnees and the communities who stayed.

In this sense, we are gathered for an unusual invitation. The only guideline is to celebrate what each individual uniquely brings to their community through improvised poems and testimonies.

Mauritania is known in the Arab world as the country of a million poets. We have three workshops lined up, in small groups of roughly 15 men, women and youth each, so people may feel confident to express themselves more spontaneously.

This tale introduces the approach to trigger a new perspective:

There was a woman walking past a construction site. Hundreds of men and women are working hard in the dust, amidst heavy noise and heat.

She asks three different workers: "What are you doing here?"

The first one replies: "Can't you see? I'm doing this stupid poorly paid work under the scorching sun and I'm barely making a living."

The second replies: "Can't you see? I'm building a very solid wall with these bricks."

The third pauses for a moment, his face lights up, he rolls his eyes to the sky and exclaims: "Can't you see? I am participating in building a castle here! "



THIERNO SOW

Imam

Without arrogance, the aim is to name what each individual has been uniquely entrusted with. Praising one's gift is beyond praising oneself, it is about praising life, creation and its Creator. The imam, Thierno, blesses this approach and starts first, which is a strong signal for the whole community.



I always continue to deepen my knowledge

I live and work with it.

Whatever I can get, I give it back to my family.

I am the guide.

Thanks to my charisma, people listen to me and understand quickly.

In mediation, people agree to make peace.

My quality is devotion.

I gain my self-confidence from the trust that the community gives me.

FATIMATA HAMAT N'GAIDE

Farmer



I have a ***garden*** and I grow ***vegetables*** that I sell to the community.

I attach my cart and I go to the riverbank to find some herbs that I sell here.

I feed my ***children***. I am health.

And health is the mother of all wealth and well-being.

I fight against child malnutrition, I strengthen the elderly, I am the community.

If I were not there, many would get sick.

And without health, there is no life.





MAMOUDOU ALI BA

Tailor, farmer and shepherd



In my family, I cater for everyone's needs, big and small.

My life in the village is about peaceful coexistence.

I am the *breeder*, the *shepherd*, the one who can *communicate* with animals.

AMINATA AROUNA BOYE

Community mobilizer for the LWF
and its partner Actions

Aminata is the only literate woman here and she reads proudly from
a notepad the lines she has just written:



I am the **woman of women.**

I am the brave woman of the village,
Brave among women.

I am an active and voluntary woman in all fields.

I am the driver of development for the village.

I am the woman-man,

The woman wearing pants.





AMADOU SAMBA SY

Veterinary assistant

Some men, as they rise to speak, wear a dignitary hat, a splendid piece of art crafted from leather and recycled plastic. Amadou translates the love that Fulani people have for their cows in a wonderful poem, of which this is a short extract:



I am Amadou Samba Sy.

I can **communicate** with these animals thanks to my **dedication**, my mystical and traditional **knowledge** and my commitment.

I love these dry horns, which moo in the morning, when they go to the pasture.

The village is empty.

When they come home at night, the weaned children sleep because they drank the milk, the milk I produce.

OUMOU IBRAHIMA BOYE

Manufacturer of embroidered bed sheets

Women have brought their colorful art craft, work tools and the products they sell, and as they speak, the many ways women contribute to the village's life unravel in front of us. Maternity and home care are obviously ever-present in their testimonies and at the heart of what they are proud of. However, each woman shows a range of talents and strengths far wider than what we usually expect from traditional roles. Beyond stereotypes, they demonstrate multiple skills that are well-recognized among their peers. Oumou started an income-generating activity and expresses herself proudly:



I'm the **warrior** among the warriors.

I'm the yellow cow among the cows.

I'm the **exemplary woman** in the family. **A woman source of life.**

I'm the woman standing in front of all the women.

It's me who **protects** children, nobody cares for them as well as I do.

I started embroidering these sheets.

I embroidered these hearts, I embroidered the love I have for my husband because I am passionate about him.

I silently express myself through my drawings and my love thus travels.

I am a heart that shines like the sun.





BOUBAKAR OUSMANE SO

Market gardener



Thanks to me, an empty bag stood up
because I am the one who has always filled the bag.

Thanks to me, the drought is short-lived,
thanks to me, the cattle does not need to
migrate because there is enough fodder
under my watch.

ADAMA AMADOU N'GOM

Veterinary assistant

Adama was trained to be a veterinary assistant by the LWF and its partner Actions. This is an essential skill for this community of breeders and one that is seldom performed by women. She has displayed the whole content of her veterinary kit in front of her and declares:



I am a woman standing, an actress of *development*.
The pharmaceutical tool is my good and my social work.
In the rain, under the sun, in the dust,
I cross dunes and rivers to heal animals.
I am a woman, I am lucky to be at the *heart of everything*.





SOULEYEMANE DEMBA BA

Secretary



I am the *volunteer*.

My role is to encourage all that can raise the level of the village.

I am the only educated man among the village wise men.

I'm the *secretary general*.

I transcribe the memory of the village.

I'm the heart of the village, its driving force.

Without me, we forget the past.

DIARIATA BOUBOU FALL

Merchant

Diariata launched a small business thanks to LWF, a business that she carries entirely in a plastic basket of hygiene products and perfumes. What she says shows that it stands for much more:



My **basket** is the reason why I sleep sound at night, because I can make a living.

In my basket, you'll find all the perfumes, incenses and fragrant pearls that women tie around their hips.

I go around the village spraying good fragrances.

In fact, I am the art of seduction.

I give energy to couples.

I am the ***doctor of women***, whenever they need me.





KALIDOU SAMBA SY

Musician



I am the **rapper** who gives **positive messages**.

I'm the **artist** of the village.

My name means spark of life,
that's how they call me in Puular.

I am the **spark of life**.

I take the stress away from people.

I contribute to change.

I make people understand, I educate, I give joy.

Young and old listen to me.

HOULAYE IFRA SOW

Young girl and dancer

Houlaye starts almost timidly, then grows more confident and as she names her talent as a dancer. She immediately jumps to her feet to prove it, followed by another friend of hers.



I am a **woman among women.**

My parents are old and depend on me. I wash the dishes,
I clean, I take care of the family.

I take care of hygiene, without me there would be diseases.

I'm the one pouring the water.

I'm the man, I'm the woman.

Without me, my parents would live in extreme poverty.

I'm the rainbow, when I come out of the house
everyone is watching me.

I am the **star** among the Fulani.

I am the wintering period of happiness and rejoicing.

And I am the best **dancer** and I will prove it to you!





AISSATA KALIDOU BA

Housewife and henna woman

Each poem or testimony is welcomed with applause, a song or a dance. Upon a joke or a challenge, some women stand up and start dancing with bursting energy and infectious laughter, while others start playing drum on a large bowl. This helps to keep the energy high as the heat has reached over 35°C. Afterwards we come back to a more quiet time, Aissata sits down and touches on her role as a housewife, speaking of her strength.



I am a **woman** standing in this village.

I am **brave** and full of **courage**.

I am a housewife.

From the morning prayer, I start cleaning the whole house.

My absence from home is a pot without salt.

I'm the **henna woman**, I make tattoos that beautify women.

I'm **strong** and I knock them all down in the arena,
all the women, all the men.

CONTINUING OUR JOURNEY IN MUFTAH EL KHEIR

The next day, we gather in *Muftah El Kheir*, another village just a few kilometers away. The setting is similar, yet its history is a completely different one. Slavery was only abolished in Mauritania in 1981, and former slaves founded this village, naming it in Arabic “the key to happiness”.

The Lutheran World Federation and its partner *ACTIONS* has also worked here for many years on an integrated community development program and dozens of households were able to start or strengthen an

income-generating activity like breeding, farming, manufacturing arts and crafts...

Just as we did the previous day, we invite each person to praise their unique contribution to their community.

As modesty seems a stronger barrier here, we encourage also smaller groups to identify and name the qualities of each, which leads to beautiful signs of friendship.





MARIAM MT AYMAR

Art-craft woman

Thanks to the livelihood project, Mariam developed her activity.



I'm the *artisan of leather*, the weaver of traditional mats. I draw *beauty*. It takes me months to weave my mats. Thanks to me, the new brides are equipped. I weave their mat with patience and selflessness, as if it were for me. The palms of my hands are blackened but I continue my weaving, constantly. So I take care of my family, I support and protect them. I am the representative of the women of the village. I am the head of my household. I sow, I weed. I live on the income from my garden. All this I do with patience because I care about those around me.

SALMA MT BLIYEL

Farmer and breeder

As Salma finds it hard to define what she brings to the community, her friends gathered around her whisper to her that she is kind and charismatic, respectful and responsible. They remind her how she gives everything of herself.



I am very active; I am a great *cultivator* and a *breeder*.

I'm a *widow*. I take good care of my household and my family.

I make necklaces with fragrant pearls.

I harvest the fruits of this tree myself in a swampy area and make necklaces.

I am the responsibility. I am the perfume and the sweetness.

I am both respectful and dynamic.

I love everyone. I do not have any problems.

I am clear before God and before human beings.





SALEM O MOUHOUM

Farmer



From morning to evening, I am in my *field working*.
I only rest on Thursday and Friday.
I'm a great *trainer*, I've taught farming
to many around me.
Yes, I taught many people to swim
and I stayed behind them.
Oh swimmer teacher,
tonight you will be drowned by your students!
I taught them to swim because when I do something,
I see beyond myself.

YOUNOUSS O ALIOUNE

Footballer



I'm the *footballer*.

The supporters follow my game with pleasure.

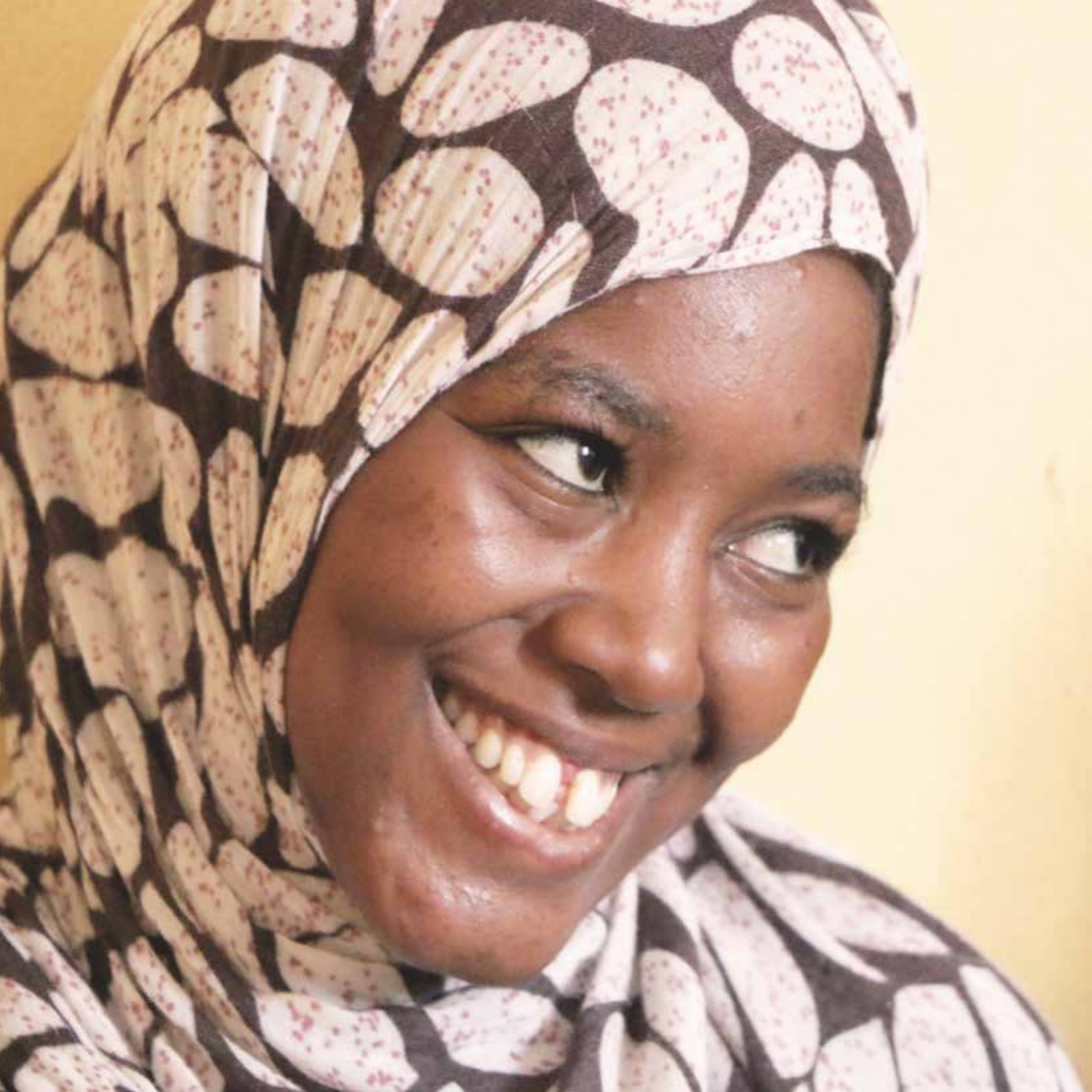
My shots blow the routine away.

I expose the world of soccer fun.

I aspire to be a star.

Since my childhood, I have been collecting trophies.





MAHMOUDA MT MOUHOUME

Student

Young boys and girls are educated at the village Koranic school and write down their texts before sharing them with the whole group.



I am a brilliant ***student***.

Day after day, I go to school.

I aspire to be a ***doctor***, a ***teacher***, a ***minister***, an ***engineer!***

I make sure the house chores are done.

Every day I make progress in the area of my education.

MOHAMED MOCTAR SAMBA

Village chief



The beauty of a *leader* comes from his group.

I am the *chief* of this village.

I am tall and strong as an elephant.

I am great thanks to the group of men who chose me.

I am the elephant that moves forward and never turns around, because I have a group behind me.

I focus on the positive side.

When I call, everyone answers my call.

My strength is the confidence the group gives me.





KHADIJETOU MT MOUHOU ME

Volunteer teacher



I help the *children to study*.

I'm the *volunteer teacher* in the school.

I help the community and my mom at the household level.

I had to interrupt my studies despite the fact that I was brilliant.

I encourage children to continue because knowledge is light and ignorance is darkness.

Knowledge reminds us that to ignore is to forget.

ELHAJ M HAIMID

Farmer and breeder



When I go to the field, my parents are confident.

I always strive to achieve my goals.

I am the **guarantor** of my family's health.

I am the one watering my family because I am in charge of supplying the **water**.

I am essential, **source of life** for my family.



BUILDING CONFIDENCE THROUGH SELF-CELEBRATION

These are only a few of the poems and testimonies that were spontaneously created in two days of intensive creative expression workshops to foster self-esteem. In that time, 90 members of the two communities were invited to stand up and express proudly what they bring to their community, showing the wide range of their talents and complementarity by unique metaphors and vivid words.

However unusual it may seem, this approach of self-celebration echoes ancient oral traditions around the globe that are still alive in many parts of Africa.

Daring to speak in “I am” in cultures where modesty is a tacit rule is not an easy task... but through the invitation of poetry and

encouraged by peers, we have witnessed wonderful dignity and friendship unfold.

The following day, we gathered again in each community, this time with everyone, inviting each to give the essence of their poem in front of the whole group.

A time of celebration and laughter, of affirmation and awe. Each individual appeared in their particular color, this time even more self-confidently than the day before. They were able to express who they are in a unique way.

Beyond the everyday dust and hard work, and to everyone’s joy, they were able to embrace and show their contribution to the castle they are part of building.



THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION WORLD SERVICE

For Hope and a Future

LWF World Service is the humanitarian and development arm of the LWF, a communion of churches, established in 1947, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. LWF World Service is a widely recognized, international, faith-based organization working in 28 countries.

We seek to bring people of all backgrounds together in the common quest for justice, peace, and reconciliation in an increasingly complex and fragmented world.

We are particularly known for our timely, compassionate, and professional humanitarian work, and for our field presence in hard-to-reach areas.

Our work is people centered and community based. Above all, we work with the most vulnerable, and we engage proactively with local government and community structures, seeking to mobilize actors at local, national and international levels, to claim and uphold their rights.

CREDITS

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THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION IN MAURITANIA

LWF has been present in Mauritania for almost half a century, as a partner for both development and humanitarian challenges. One of the earliest achievements was to help halt desertification by planting a "green belt" around Nouakchott.

Since then, LWF has supported returnees and other vulnerable communities in making a living with dignity, improving education as well as promoting water, sanitation and hygiene across the country.

Since 2011, LWF has managed the Mbera refugee camp on behalf of UNHCR. This camp hosts circa 50,000 - 60,000 refugees who fled violence in nearby Mali.

Through an integrated community development

program, LWF has supported over 20,000 vulnerable people between 2015 and 2020, especially women and young people in Brakna, Hodh El Charghi and the outskirts of Nouakchott.

Priorities included mitigating the effects of climate change, reducing ethnic-social tensions and promoting new sources of income.

As a result, participants have shown increased resilience, while also setting-up rapid community-based responses to disasters. They have found ways to generate income sustainably, as well as to live together in a more peaceful environment.

This book of poems is precisely a tribute to their wealth of resilience, wisdom and solidarity.

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