SENTEINELLES
TO THE RESCUE OF WOUNDED INNOCENCE

COLOMBIA
Cooking for reintegration

BURKINA FASO
Behind the scenes of a surgical mission

SENEGAL
A life transformed
The beautiful fight of Colombian mothers

“I am a golden spark” would say, a few month ago, a bubbly grandmother during a women’s gathering in our care centre in Minas, Colombia, as she was proud to be now contributing to her granddaughter’s education and blossoming. And she talked in detail about a life trajectory riddled with obstacles; but also, about her relentless fight to overcome them. Besides her, other women agreed with modesty, their eyes down. They identified themselves with this story of assaults, of early pregnancies, of insufficient income, of the weight of illiteracy.

Not all of them are a golden spark and can talk easily. However, here they are, these women with coarse language and abrupt gestures. They persevere and keep attending our thematic workshops aiming at developing their self-confidence and some autonomy. Gradually, these women testify about their experiences and encourage each other with deep respect. “Around the table”, as you can read on page 5, they now dare. They dare to talk, to think or to dream about the future, to have an opinion. They acknowledge the importance of their roles and aim at breaking old social patterns. We pay a vibrant tribute to their tenacity and their creativity.

| SWITZERLAND |

A young Burkinabe boy goes back home

Ousseni was able to go back home after a 7-month stay in Switzerland. In his region, Ousseni is a young shepherd. He lives with his farmer parents and his four younger brothers and two sisters in a village that is one hour away by bike from the closest town. He is a very kind and nice boy.

He came to Switzerland for the treatment of a bone tumour on his face and was successfully operated on at the University Hospital of Geneva. The teenager showed much courage during his treatment and also during his hospital stay that unfortunately was extended due to an infection. Doctors were able to stop it thanks to a long antibiotic therapy. Fortunately, Ousseni was regularly visited during this period by a devoted volunteer. It enabled him to be less bored in his hospital room.

During his convalescence, the young man adjusted very well to the daily life in the House of Terre des hommes. He also showed solidarity by taking a newcomer under his wing. Ousseni was deeply moved when he had to leave the people who were there for him during his stay in Switzerland. His departure deeply moved us too and we wish him a safe trip back home and the best for his future endeavours.
For several years Aissata Baillet, a Nigerien surgeon, has been travelling to Burkina Faso to operate on babies and children with cleft lips and palates. This deformity of the lip or of the palate and sometimes of both, exists at birth. It has important consequences on the infant’s nursing and development. In addition, it brings stigmata on the newborn babies as they are rejected because of local superstition. Sentinelles participates in two annual missions funded by Dr. Baillet’s association and by the Smile Train NGO. Before the interventions, we welcome about 35 newborn babies with their mothers in our centre so their condition can improve thanks to better nutrition. After the operation, the newborn can stay up to one month in our centre to be given the necessary post-surgery treatment. During the last mission in October, 39 children could be given a new face that brought a smile back to their relatives. The next mission will take place in January 2019.

In the #252, we talked about the situation of many minors imprisoned for long periods without sentence. We had for instance spoken about Fara and her mother, kept in prison over the last 30 months without a sentence. Thanks to our legal support, their situation progressed favourably. They were set free shortly after our article, and our support has been ongoing. As a consequence, Fara was able to find a job in a beverage factory where she still works. In parallel, the young woman, who had to drop out of school because of her prison time, attended night class and was able to pass her A-levels. Her mother, as for her, was able to open a cheap restaurant in a strategic neighbourhood of town and business is thriving. Thanks to their earnings, mother and daughter are able to provide for their family and don't need Sentinelles any longer to move on with their lives.
As they cooked local dishes under Sentinelles’ guidance, Colombian women recovered self-confidence and learned how to exchange, think collectively and develop their own life project. A very tasteful adventure.

Sentinelles is active in the Colombian regions of Amaga and Angelopolis – Minas, an important industrial and mining region. It is therefore a potential source of employment opportunities for its inhabitants. However, one finding is manifest: 96.6% of the population that can work cannot aspire to a job because of the low educational level of the region’s inhabitants. As a matter of fact, only 12.1% of the population attended school and only half of them went to primary school. Without access to education, it is very difficult to develop an activity in the industrial sector. Consequently, the vast majority of the Amaga and Angelopolis households live in social precariousness.

**WOMEN ARE THE FIRST AFFECTED**
Confronted with such a situation, women are forced, more widely than men, to stay home. They still have a very traditional role. From a very young age, they must help in the house, do the chores and become mothers. It is worth noting that Minas is one of the Colombian regions with a very high number of teenage mothers; i.e. young girls aged between 15 and 19. Therefore, the topic of women’s education in this area is crucial to us and has been mobilizing us for more than 10 years.

In June 2018, all local women were enrolled in the programmes we organize in Minas (about 50). They were invited to collaborate on a cooking project. The general idea was to propose animation workshops so they could adopt new diets without changing the staple ingredients and thanks to informal training.

**We started these workshops with about twenty participants; and three women who also asked to participate despite their very low self-esteem. It comforted us that we were on the right track.**

These women are vulnerable because many of them have been victims of violence. Furthermore, most of them haven’t completed compulsory schooling and therefore they face great financial difficulties and depend on occasional assistance by the state or a third party.

It has now been six months that we have been working to improve these women’s self-image. We noted that there are, on average, 14 participants in each workshop. For you to better
understand how this project is built, you must know that each session is divided into two sections: the first one is built around an activity during which we propose tools to enhance self-esteem; the second one consists of preparing a recipe with ingredients that they commonly use. During these various sessions, we exchange on topics as diverse as nutrition and communication within the family or the couple.

FIRST ASSESSMENT
The first stage of the “Around the table” project came to an end last December. Each workshop created genuine opportunities to exchange and enabled participants to develop a support network. Our last session was deeply moving for both parties, the participants and us. In addition, we felt once more how motivated these women are. It was truly a highly gratifying and encouraging final session. Each Colombian decided to cook a recipe and to share it with the guests. We were happy to notice that most of them, who usually are not confident to speak in public, were able to express themselves in a confident and proud manner. One after the other, they presented themselves in front of the assembly that was composed of one or several family members and they explained the recipe they had chosen. They also gave it a name. During this closing session, these women expressed how important this training had been for them as they came to realize they were able to attend a training programme. It allowed them to be recognized by their family and to regain their place.

This project has had a deep mobilizing impact among the participants. It is to be noted that, on the occasion of the final session, each of them had taken the time to look after their appearance. They had chosen a nice dress that was showing their femininity to their advantage. They were displaying their true identity, that of women who are dignified and proud of it. This experience enabled them to regain a positive image of themselves, to be more attentive to who they are, to respect themselves and make others respect them as women. Moreover, they shared this moment with their families which could only increase their pride. Thanks to this true success, our participants are even more motivated to engage in the second stage of the project. This one started in February. The objective is to keep encouraging them to increase the self-confidence they thought they had lost; and also to develop a life project resulting in an income generating activity by expanding their vision of what is possible. These women are really eager to engage down this path and earn their own income. We remain fully committed to supporting them and providing opportunities for them to achieve their goals by themselves.
Sentinelles’ team from Fada N’Gourma in Burkina Faso goes twice a year to Tanguiéta in Benin to take part in surgical missions organised by St. Jean de Dieu Hospital and the Fondation Genevoise pour la formation et la Recherche Médicale. Here is a behind the scenes look at these operations to stop fistulas and bladder leak, focusing on Maalo and Djapoa, two women accompanied by Sentinelles.

Tuesday 13th November 2018 is the departure date. Two minibuses have been hired to take all the sick women to Tanguiéta, along with those accompanying them and Sentinelles’ team. There are therefore 28 people crossing the border between Burkina Faso and Benin. The distance between Fada and Tanguiéta is only 200 kilometres, but the journey takes a long time due to the state of the roads and the numerous stops at security control posts and frontiers. Arriving in Tanguiéta at around 4pm, we go straight to the women’s accommodation centre situated 3km from the hospital where the operations will take place. A minibus has been provided to ensure the transfer of patients to and from the centre and the hospital.

PREOPERATIVE EXAMINATIONS AND INTERVENTIONS
The preoperative consultations take place early on the morning of the 14th November. The women will then come back for blood tests, a pad test to measure the quantity of urine leaking and an ultrasound. It is then time for the operations. They are spread over two weeks and once operated on, the women are transferred to the maternity ward for postoperative care. This lasts between one and three weeks depending on convalescence time for the young women.

RETURN TO FADA
After the postoperative pad test, the women are allowed to return to Fada. There, they are housed in our Reception Centre and stay there for 2 weeks to one month depending on whether they were suffering from a prolapse or fistulas. During this time, the convalescent women follow training of their choice in order to be able to reintegrate socially and economically as soon as they leave.
Maalo is a young girl of 18. She arrived at the Reception Centre completely distraught as for her there was no cure for her illness. She was suffering from obstetrical fistulas after a very difficult first delivery, which unfortunately led to the death of the newborn child. As a result, in addition to the traumatic death of her baby, Maalo was losing abundant amounts of urine throughout the day. Of course, her husband rejected her. She was taken in by her brother, who contacted a regional medical centre, which sent the patient to us.

Arriving in Sentinelles’ Reception Centre on Monday 12th November, the next day Maalo was on her way to Benin to get back her health. The young woman, who had never left her village, found the journey to Benin very long. On arrival, the Burkinabe girl like her companions, underwent a series of preoperative tests before going into theatre. Maalo was one of the first women hospitalised and her operation by vaginal passage was carried out without complications. It was only a few days later that urine began to leak again for the girl from Burkina Faso in spite of the vesical catheter. In tears, Maalo asked for us to be called as quickly as possible. And with Julie from Sentinelles, they rushed to see Dr. Guiro, who would resuture the next day. After this second intervention, the young woman was declared cured of her fistula and she has no more urinary leaks. At last, Maalo finds her smile again and her taste for life. She thanks the doctor, Sentinelles and all the staff warmly as, thanks to the teamwork, her life has found the equilibrium and the direction that she had thought lost forever.

In the Reception Centre, Maalo follows the instructions given and eats well. She learns how to make liquid soap, follows sessions to raise awareness of personal, clothing and food hygiene in order to avoid a new obstetrical fistula. She also follows sessions on perineal rehabilitation. As for her professional future, it also takes a positive direction. Maalo talks to Julie about her desire to practise fattening animals, a technique to plump up sheep before selling them on.

Maalo tells us that when she goes home, she is going to do prevention awareness so that the women in her village can avoid suffering from obstetrical fistulas. She is also going to tell those who are already suffering that there exists a structure that will take care of them free of charge if they lack the means.

Djapoa arrived in Fada very sad, as she had nobody to accompany her. The woman who was supposed to be at her side had not come because she feared, through superstition, that she might catch the same illness as Djapoa. Finally, a chain of solidarity between those accompanying the other women and carers was organised around Djapoa. This 35-year-old woman therefore took the bus to Tanquiéta for the first time. Just like Maalo, Djapoa was suffering from urine leakage following a difficult first delivery, which unfortunately led to the loss of her first child. Straight after this first ordeal, a fistula appeared.

In spite of this, Djapoa later managed to have two children. Her husband tried to help her and went with her to see some marabouts to cure her. It was finally a weaver from her region, a former patient of Sentinelles who had been operated on successfully, who told her about us.

In the Tanguéta camp, Djapoa can’t stop herself from worrying as she is without a carer. We reassure her, explaining that we will always be by her side. The operation was carried out without complication by vaginal passage. The first two days went by without any major worry. The third was more complicated as Djapoa complained about abdominal pain and feeling bloated. But after a little treatment, everything returned to normal. There was more fear than harm.

After her spell in hospital, Djapoa came back to the camp where her convalescence passed without any major worries. When she left, the young lady told us how happy she was to be going home cured and relieved not to be pointed out anymore. Concerning the income generating activity, Djapoa chose weaving. As she left, the thirty-something-year-old tells us that she doesn’t have words to thank Sentinelles as, thanks to us, she will never be marginalised again. What’s more, she will be able to say with pride that she is cured and that her illness was neither a curse nor a contagious disease.
When she was 5, Awa started developing a goiter because of an iodine deficiency. Her family is poor, and it was impossible to bring her to hospital to be diagnosed. And, also, to be treated accordingly. Her parents, who really worried about her, turned to traditional medicine, which is much less expensive. Unfortunately, it proved unsuccessful as the goiter kept growing until it became very incapacitating. Developing a strong complex, Awa became withdrawn, excluded herself from social life and didn’t go to school. The girl clearly had very difficult teenage years.

Many years later, Awa’s father heard about a child in the neighbourhood who had suffered from noma and who had been treated by an NGO based in Mbour. He also learned that children affected by other pathologies are also regularly taken care of when their families cannot afford their treatment. There is a great distance between Awa’s village and the Sentinelles office; however, Mr. Dione is capable of anything for his daughter to be treated. He sets off with Awa and they eventually reach a house under a large mango tree as villagers told them they would. This is how Awa and her father came to meet us in June 2018.

A few weeks later, Awa is successfully operated in Senegal. Although the scar is almost invisible, Awa will need to take drugs for the rest of her life to treat her thyroid. Fortunately, these drugs are relatively cheap, and the family will be able to fend for themselves.

A few weeks ago, Awa visited us in our Mbour office, smiling brightly and happy to have gotten back to a normal life. She now knows she won’t be excluded any longer and she’ll be able to get married one day. We took a photograph of her under the famous Sentinelles mango tree. Very concerned by the harsh ordeal his daughter went through, the father went through, the father is animating awareness sessions about her sickness to the attention of the inhabitants of his village and he provides them with information on prevention means.*