



MAURITANIA: UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT FOOD SITUATION BASED ON THE EVIDENCE

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In 2004 drought and locusts compounded the lingering effects of several bad years in Mauritania resulting in a food security emergency affecting 65 percent of the population between November 2004 and the present. However, emergency programs carried out by the Government, UN agencies, and NGOs, with contributions from donors, generally ameliorated the impact of this emergency. This, in combination with the good rainy season underway prompted FEWS NET to downgrade Mauritania's alert status to a Food Security Warning. While pre-famine indicators were present earlier in the year, at this time the claims of a potential famine published in the media are not borne out by evidence on the ground.

1. Is there currently or will there soon be a threat of famine or massive food shortfall in Mauritania?

- Generally the emergency response measures taken by the Government, UN agencies and NGOs have mitigated the threat of famine flagged earlier in the year by FEWS NET (see FEWS NET's March Emergency Alert for Mauritania). There remain, however, areas of the country where extreme food insecurity persists especially in Aftout (west of the agro-pastoral zone) and in the Southwest (Bassikounou Moughataa).
- Mauritania has faced a series of shocks in the last five years that compounded extreme poverty in the country and resulted in extreme food insecurity and, in some cases, local famine conditions. Since 2000, the population has continued to experience poor agricultural production due to the effects of flooding (2001), drought (2002-2003) and the combined effects of a widespread locust infestation and a premature end to the rainy season (2004). The current situation is the result of the combined effects of these shocks, which have progressively eroded the resilience of the population, leaving a large number of people destitute and highly vulnerable to food insecurity. As a result, any further shock could quickly reverse recent improvements in food security that have followed the on-going emergency response and good start to the rainy season.
- It is also important to note that on-going emergency response activities need to be continued and in some areas (Aftout and the southeast) improved, at least until this year's harvest in September.

2. Are there differing opinions in Mauritania as to whether the country is experiencing or will soon experience a famine?

- In Mauritania, an emergency subcommittee, which includes the principal organizations monitoring food security in the country, works to jointly assess and respond to food security crises. The subcommittee includes the Government of Mauritania's Food Security Commissariat (FSC), the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), FEWS NET and NGOs. At present, there is consensus among subcommittee members that there is no threat of famine in Mauritania. However, this consensus is based on the recognition of the need to continue implementation of current emergency programs to ensure that food aid needs are met during the pre-harvest lean period ending in October.



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- This year's rainy season has so far been good in many production zones as well as in pastoral and agro pastoral areas. Despite some seed shortages, prospects for the agricultural season are positive, and livestock conditions and prices (especially for small ruminants) are already improving. Thus the threat of famine has been replaced by the prospect that affected families will be able to begin the process of recovery over the next year.

3. How many people are affected by the current emergency?

- About 1.8 million people in Mauritania were considered food insecure as a result of locusts and drought in 2004. Approximately 23,600 MT of food aid was distributed by WFP through one of the three components of the emergency program: food for work (FFW), free distributions and Village Food Security Stocks (SAVS).
- In mid-August, approximately 500,000 people of the 1.2 million people identified for assistance were receiving assistance from at least one of the emergency programs from WFP, USA, Italy, France, the European Union and the government (FSC). Emergency operations for an additional 700,000 persons continue but have been hampered by recent heavy rainfall which has washed out roads and prevented access to affected areas.

4. What impact did the drought and desert locusts have on domestic grain production?

- The drought and desert locusts had a considerable impact on domestic grain production including sorghum, rice, millet and corn. Rice crops experienced the lowest rate of damage. The 2004/05 grain harvest was 47% less than the 2003/04 season harvest.
- However, it is important to note that Mauritania imports about 70 percent of its cereal needs, unlike Niger, for example, which produces about 90 percent of the cereals it consumes in a normal year. Thus, a poor production year can be more easily offset in Mauritania by increased imports. Imported rice has seen relatively stable prices in 2005.

5. What impact did the drought and desert locusts have on pasture and animal conditions?

- A joint FEWS NET, WFP and government assessment in September and November 2004 found that drought and locusts had a significant impact on pastures and therefore livestock. In the southern part of the country, locusts arrived when the first grass of the season was sprouting, causing significant damage. In these areas the rainy season also started late, increasing the duration of the dry season and stressing livestock. In many other pastoral areas of the country, poor rains resulted in mediocre pastures.
- Poor pasture conditions as a result of locusts and drought resulted in the early migration of animals from the affected zones and the rapid depletion of pasture in areas with good grazing, including the border area with northeast Senegal and southwest Mali – southeast Gorgol, south Guidimakha, south Assaba and the south regions of the two Hodhs which were also being grazed by pastoralists from Mali and Senegal. These conditions impacted migratory herds, as well as resident herds not accustomed to migration. Pastures rapidly deteriorated, as did livestock conditions and thus livestock prices. At the same time the demand and price of fodder increased significantly.
- To compound matters, high livestock mortality and premature births were noted among small ruminants in the most affected zones.
- Pastoral and agro-pastoral households depend on the sale of livestock in order to purchase staple foods in the markets. Already these households had lost livestock as a result of previous shocks over the last five years and therefore had limited capacity to cope with another bad year. As a result of

depleted herds and low animal prices, these households were unable to access sufficient food through markets, and required emergency assistance.

6. What are the current malnutrition rates and what do they indicate?

- Few nutrition surveys have been carried out in Mauritania in the last year. The only available nutrition surveys were conducted from December 2004 to January 2005 by the regional health administration of Brakna supported by UNICEF. The results of these surveys indicated a prevalence of global acute malnutrition of 12.4 percent in the moughataas of Magta-Lahjar, Aleg, Boghé, Bababé and M'Bagne, with a corresponding rate of severe acute malnutrition of 2.4%. These rates are cause for concern and rated as a “risky situation” by the World Health Organization and require targeted supplementary feeding as well as therapeutic feeding programs.
- These same results also showed that the geographic distribution of malnutrition was variable, but the prevalence of GAM and SAM exceeded the respective 10 and 2 percent thresholds, respectively, in nearly all 110 towns of the 19 communes visited.
- A recent survey conducted in the *adwaba* (rain-fed agricultural villages) of the Hodhs in Brakna and Tagnat by Belgium’s Doctors without Borders, whose results are not yet released, is also expected to confirm high malnutrition rates with severe malnutrition in children under five still surpassing the 2 percent threshold.
- WFP Mauritania also confirms that there are many signs of severe malnutrition among children under 5 years old in the Bassikounou and Fassala communes.

7. What response strategies have been implemented by the people living in the affected regions?

- From August 2004 to July 2005, households continually modified their traditional strategies to access food. This was linked to a disruption in the flow of food supplies (drop in the supply of imports in the border zones, and large grain producers who directed their surpluses for sale in the cities), the deterioration of their purchasing power (essentially determined by the market value of small ruminants), and a constant increase in the price of imported cereals.
- In the agricultural zones, food access strategies were essentially organized around the SAVS which offer reduced prices for grains compared to the markets, and around skipping or modifying daily meals. In the pastoral zones, the absence of pastures forced an earlier than normal livestock migration, and increased the need to purchase livestock fodder in order to save the female animals.

8. How high have grain prices risen?

- In all markets, grain prices have constantly increased since August 2004. While imported grain prices show a continuous increase, traditional grains increased at rates which were at times more than 300% above the last 5 year average. The most spectacular increases were for rain-fed sorghum at the beginning of the agricultural season. In the isolated zones of Aftout, the price has been as high as 3000 UM. This anomaly could be linked to the high demand for seeds as substantial price increases for grains have been noted in agriculture zones where there was no seed assistance.

9. Why did grain prices not fall as quickly as usual?

- Mauritania relies on imports for the majority of its cereal supply. Fluctuations in the exchange rate between the national currency (non-traded) and other currencies (CFA, euro, dollars) in 2005 resulted in reduced import capacity and therefore low availability of cereals on the national market, leading to

higher than normal prices. It is also possible that strong demand for local purchase by donors contributed upward pressure on cereal prices. Grain prices normally begin to decline when estimates for current year production are made and additional cereal imports begin to arrive from coastal West Africa in September.

10. Are West African markets contributing to the food security problems in Mauritania?

- The closest West African grain markets, Mali and Senegal, are more oriented toward the coastal countries of West Africa (which are part of the same monetary and economic zone) than towards Mauritania, which has withdrawn from the ECOWAS. Moreover, Mauritania imports cheap cereals from the world market, especially poor quality rice from Southeast Asia. Therefore, regional markets have not played a major role in this year's high prices.

11. How is the current rainy season progressing and will this resolve the problem?

- The rainy season began well in the southeastern part of the country (from east of Brakna to south of the Hodh El Chargui). Unfortunately, the area planted with crops is clearly less than normal due to poor access to seeds. However, recent seed distributions in Guidimakha in the Hodhs and Assaba contributed to increasing the area planted.
- Pasture and water conditions improved considerably in southern Mauritania, but remain particularly poor in the western part of Brakna and in agro-pastoral zones. Due to improved pasture and water access, small ruminant health has improved and prices are going up quickly.

12. Is the situation in Mauritania comparable in severity to the situation in the other countries of West Africa including Niger?

- There are serious food security problems in Mauritania—in particular among the poor agricultural households of the Aftout, the southeast of the two Hodhs and the river valley, in addition to the agro-pastoral and pastoral households that have been affected by poor terms of trade and five years of poor agricultural production. However the level of food insecurity in Mauritania is less severe than Niger at present due to a generally adequate emergency response. Additionally, it appears that Mauritania being a net food importer of rice, a crop which has not seen the same price fluctuations as other commodities, has also cushioned the severity of the situation.

13. What will be the probable consequences if there is no increase in current assistance levels?

- The population remains reliant on current emergency operations; these efforts need to be continued at least until the next harvest in October 2005. If sufficient resources are not made available to support these efforts and improve them in the areas highlighted above for zones still facing extreme food insecurity, the situation could rapidly deteriorate. Certainly further assistance will be needed to help households recover, especially those who are now destitute as a result of crises over the last five years.

14. What does FEWS NET plan to do to reinforce its monitoring?

- FEWS NET has maintained a high level of vigilance in Mauritania over the last five years. During the next few months FEWS NET will increase its monitoring through field visits in collaboration with its partners, placing more emphasis on zones that are not receiving emergency assistance and those which had a delayed start to the rainy season.