Mauritania is a lower middle-income country in the Sahel with a population of 4.6 million that lives over a vast but mostly arid 1,030,700 km² territory.

Mauritania is exposed to recurrent cycles of drought, resulting in the degradation of natural resources and structurally affecting productive capacity, resilience and food security of the population. According to the November 2020 Cadre Harmonisé, 409,940 people are projected to be food insecure between June and August 2021 (lean season).

Mauritania experienced two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, between May and July 2020 and most recently, a second wave that began in mid-November 2020, with a peak in December. Since this peak, the number of cases has dropped considerably.

Mauritania continues to host the largest number of Malian refugees in West Africa. The number of refugees registered in Mbera camp had reached 62,546 (Dec 2020). Most of the refugees are unlikely to return to their homes in the near future due to the volatile security situation in Mali and the restrictive measures implemented to prevent the spread of the COVID-19.

As part of crisis response activities, WFP country portfolio aims to meet the basic food and nutrition need of crisis affected people as well as to provide UNHAS flight services for all humanitarian and development partners. In parallel, WFP strives to ensure the continuation of resilience programmes, while strengthening institutional capacity and minimizing gender inequalities. WFP has been present in Mauritania since 1964.

Operational Updates

- Preparations are ongoing for the 2021 lean season response, setting to start in April in pastoral areas. WFP is planning to intervene in the most food insecure departments in the regions of Tagant and Guidimakha (source: November Cadre Harmonisé). The 2021 National Response Plan, developed by an inclusive working group (composed of the Government, UN lead agencies, national and international NGOs) and led by WFP, will be further refined based on the results of the Cadre Harmonisé (CH) in March. The CH is expected to provide a more realistic assessment of the food and nutrition situation on the ground, after the second wave of COVID-19.

- As part of the malnutrition treatment programme, WFP reached 9,045 children and pregnant and lactating women and girls in 10 departments located in the regions of Assaba, Guidimakha and Hodh El Charghi (the three regions where WFP is implementing its integrated resilience package). In view of increasing synergies between complementary resilience activities, WFP prioritised sites where Food assistance For Assets (FFA) activities are already carried out.

- WFP continued to implement the school feeding programme, reaching 47,648 children in 10 departments of the three regions targeted. WFP conducted capacity strengthening activities for canteen managers and management committee members in nine departments to strengthen their knowledge on how to manage a school canteen. In addition, with the prospect of expanding and refocusing the school canteens in resilience sites, WFP and the Regional Directorate of National Education (DREN) carried out a joint mission in the region of Hodh El Charghi to set up committees responsible for the management of new canteens.

- In Mbera camp, February’s general food distributions were coupled with those of January to minimize the risk of spread of COVID-19. A total of 59,376 beneficiaries were assisted through cash-based transfers and 53,269 through in-kind food. In parallel, through malnutrition treatment activities, WFP reached 448 children with 1 mt of Plumpy Sup and 263 women with 1 mt of Super Cereal Plus. With the aim of preventing acute malnutrition, 3,495 children and 814 women were assisted with 25 mt of Super Cereal Plus. Moreover, 5,031 students benefited from a morning porridge as part of WFP school feeding programme (6 mt of Super Cereal Plus were distributed).

- Food assistance For Assets (FFA) activities were implemented in Guidimakha and Assaba regions. They mainly consisted of water and soil conservation and soil defence and restoration.
WFP continued to significantly advance in setting up the national preparedness and response scheme for food security and nutrition. Thanks to the support of its partners (World Bank, UNICEF and FAO) and WFP’s sustained advocacy vis a vis the Technical Working Group, it has been agreed that the Prime Minister is in charge of the validation of the annual response plan. Moreover, the legal framework of the future scheme was agreed among main governmental departments and institutions concerned. The National Commission for Food (CSA in its French acronym) obtained a written commitment from the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs to secure dedicated resources for setting up the mechanism.

As part of the African Risk Capacity’s Replica Coverage programme (a climate risk insurance coverage), the Technical Working Group (TWG) finalized the customization of the drought insurance for 2021. Two options have been analysed: i) to cover agriculture and livestock within the same insurance or ii) to separately consider the impact of drought on agriculture and on livestock to have a better tailored assistance. These two options are under further investigation and the TWG will decide which one to choose according to respective pros and cons.

United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) transported 143 passengers and over 563 kg cargo, connecting Nouakchott-Kiffa and Bassikounou, through 35 in-country rotations. The official re-opening of the Bassikounou airstrip was marked by an event attended by WFP Country Director, UNHAS Chief, heads of UN agencies and NGOs present in Bassikounou as well as a delegation from the Ministry of Equipment and Transport, the highest regional authority, the mayor and the military authorities of Bassikounou. The event was an opportunity to recall the crucial role of UNHAS for the humanitarian community working, as well as to underline the good and fruitful collaboration with the authorities.

Monitoring

- In the framework of setting up a reliable and consensual early warning system, the quarterly newsletters on food and nutrition security for the regions of Gorgol and Brakna, Hodh El Charghi and Guidimakha were produced by community sentinel sites and were validated at the regional level. They will be transmitted to the Director of the Food Security Observatory (OSA in its French acronym) for final validation.

- Disaggregated data at departmental level was collected for the Food Security Monitoring Survey. The raw data, along with other key nutrition and agropastoral data analysis, will be used to inform the March Cadre Harmonisé.

Challenges

- WFP faces an estimated funding shortage of approximately USD 15 million for the next six months (March to August 2021) representing 51 percent of the requirements for the period (USD 22 million). The biggest funding deficit concerns the assistance to Malian refugees in the Mbera camp (66 percent funding gap) and malnutrition treatment activities (84 percent funding gap). WFP will implement mitigation measures such as reduced rations in Mbera camp while strengthening advocacy efforts to secure funds to continue to carry out malnutrition treatment activities. Rapid confirmation of funds is crucial to prevent forthcoming lack of resources and to anticipate long procurement lead times.

Donors

Donors to WFP Mauritania in 2021 include Canada, Germany, Monaco, BHA and United Kingdom. Additional support has been provided by UN Peace Building Fund.