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WFP's support to strengthening the national social protection system in Mauritania

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Acronyms

BMZ	German Federal Ministry of Cooperation (Bundes Ministerium für Zusammenarbeit)
CAB	Needs Analysis Committee (Comité d'analyse des besoins)
CSA	Commission for Food Security (Commissariat à la Sécurité Alimentaire)
DCAN	National Crisis Prevention and Response Mechanism (Dispositif de Prévention et de Réponse aux Crises Alimentaires)
ECHO	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
FNRCAN	Nutritional Crisis Response Fund (Fonds National de Réponse aux Crises Alimentaires et Nutritionnelles)
ILO	International Labour Organization
KII	Key Informant Interview
MAM	moderate acute malnutrition
MOU	memorandum of understanding
OSA	Food Security Observatory (Observatoire de la Sécurité Alimentaire)
SNPS	National Strategy for Social Protection (Stratégie Nationale de Protection Sociale)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WEF	World Economic Forum
WFP	World Food Programme



1. Introduction

This case study reviews the World Food Programme’s (WFP) support to social protection in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania since the launch of its 2019–2023 Country Strategic Plan. It assesses how WFP has supported the 12 building blocks of Mauritania’s national social protection system as outlined in WFP’s Strategy for Support to Social Protection, focusing on adaptive social protection and WFP’s collaboration with the World Bank on the national Social Registry and shock response. This was a light-touch exercise, undertaken through a rapid literature review and interviews with current WFP staff and partners. It is part of a suite of country case studies undertaken for WFP by researchers at the Institute of Development Studies, to create a portfolio of learning on WFP’s work on enabling social protection around the world.

2. Context

Mauritania is a lower middle-income Sahel-Saharan country, with an ethnically diverse¹ and gender divided population of 4.8 million (ranking 146th out of 156 countries in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index²), and a multi-dimensional poverty rate of 56.9 percent,³ despite abundant natural resources (including iron, copper, gold, natural gas, livestock and fish)⁴ (WFP, 2023a; WFP, 2023b; Watson, 2023; MPPN, 2023; UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, 2023). It is a vast, arid country with low agricultural production⁵ affected by seasonal food crises (a cyclical lean season). This is exacerbated by the climate crisis, with increasing frequency and severity of events,⁶ which contribute to persistently high levels of malnutrition and food insecurity⁷ (Watson, 2023; WFP, 2023b; Renaudin et al, 2023).

populations in the south (Watson, 2023). The nation has experienced increasing fragility in recent years, due to: shocks related to the climate crisis; the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic; the ongoing Ukraine crisis; and the continuing conflict in neighbouring Mali, leading to increases in basic food prices (Watson, 2023; WFP, 2023b). Currently politically stable, Mauritania hosts the largest number of Malian refugees in West Africa, with 122,000 registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), most living in and around Mbera camp (Watson, 2023; WFP, 2024; UNHCR, 2024). The region that hosts the camp (Hodh Ech Chargui), and the camp itself, had two of the highest rates of global chronic malnutrition in the country (28.5 percent and 28.9 percent, respectively, in 2022)⁸ (WFP, 2023b).

The highest poverty rates are among rural

- 1 Black Moors (Haratines - Arabic-speaking descendants of African origin who were enslaved) 40%, White Moors (of Arab-Amazigh descent, known as Beydane) 30%, Sub-Saharan Mauritians (non-Arabic speaking, largely resident in or originating from the Senegal River Valley, including Toucouleurs, Fulani, Soninke, Wolof, and Bambara ethnic groups) 30% (CIA, 2024).
- 2 The Global Gender Gap Index benchmarks progress towards gender parity and compares countries’ gender gaps across four dimensions: economic opportunities, education, health and political leadership (WEF, 2021).
- 3 WFP (2023b: 40) notes that the National Statistics Office indicated that the national poverty rate was around 20% in 2019 but this is “likely to be adjusted upwards during the next survey taking into account the knock-on effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukrainian Crisis, and overall global inflationary pressures”.
- 4 Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.
- 5 Agricultural production covers only about 30% of the country’s annual food needs (Renaudin et al, 2023). This makes Mauritania very import dependant (WFP, 2022).
- 6 Mauritania ranks among the top 20 countries in terms of vulnerability to climate disruptions (Watson, 2023).
- 7 An estimated 878,921 people (18.3% of the national population) are classified as food insecure, the highest percentage across all the Sahel countries (WFP, 2023b).
- 8 The camp had an acute malnutrition rate of 8.4 percent, and severe malnutrition rate of 0.8 percent in 2022 (WFP, 2023b).

Social protection context

Mauritania has an active government-led social protection system that is governed by the 2013 National Social Protection Strategy (Stratégie Nationale de Protection Sociale – SNPS) and is working towards a national adaptive social protection system (WFP, 2023b; Kreidler et al, 2022; Watson, 2023). The launch of the 2013 strategy “marked increased government ownership and led to a significant change in the social protection landscape in the country” (WFP, 2023b: 28), also influenced by donor supported social protection activities in the wider Sahel region, such as the Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program.⁹ In reality, social protection was not a government priority between 2013 and 2019, and the SNPS was not implemented. This changed when the current government came into power in 2019 and announced social protection as a presidential priority, since it aligns closely with the President’s political agenda.¹⁰

The government’s focus on social protection contributed to: the National Strategy for Accelerated Growth and Shared Prosperity 2016–2030; an enhanced Social Registry; a national safety net programme; and the Dispositif national de prévention et de réponse aux Crises Alimentaires et Nutritionnelles (DCAN)¹¹ (National Crisis Prevention and Response Mechanism), which was created in 2021 as a tool to coordinate the prevention and management of food and nutrition crises (WFP, 2023b; Watson, 2023). The government now leads the Plan National de Réponse (PNR) (National Response Plan) and has recently developed the Fonds National de Réponse aux Crises Alimentaires et Nutritionnelles (FNRCAN) (National Crisis Response Fund), which will serve as the primary financing mechanism for the lean season response (WFP, 2023).

With the support of its partners, including WFP and the World Bank, the core structures and systems that have been built are centred around shock-responsive social protection, a process guided by learning from and drawing inspiration from the experiences of other countries, specifically Senegal and Niger.¹² There are ongoing efforts to update the National Social Protection Strategy to “reflect considerable evolution in the sector and to respond to current challenges” (ESCWA, 2023; Watson, 2023: 40).

There are two main national social protection actors: the Commissariat à la Sécurité Alimentaire (CSA) (Commission for Food Security) which is authorized by the Prime Minister; and the General Delegation for National Solidarity and the Fight against Exclusion (Taazour)¹³ established in 2019, which is overseen by the President (WFP, 2023b; Watson, 2023). There is a contributory social protection system and a non-contributory system. There are also two main national social safety net programmes, one led by each actor (Kreidler et al, 2022). Taazour manages the government’s social safety net programmes for the country’s vulnerable populations, supported by the World Bank’s Social Safety Net System Project (Kreidler et al, 2022). CSA, with government, World Bank, French Development Agency and other donor funds, is delivered through two programmes – Tekavoul Shock and El Maouna, the national shock-responsive safety net – and provides annual unconditional cash transfers to households affected by severe food and nutrition insecurity during the lean season (Kreidler et al, 2022). Other non-governmental humanitarian actors, such as WFP, Oxfam, World Vision, Veterinarians Without Borders (Veterinaires Sans Frontières), the Mauritanian Red Cross, and Action Against Hunger, have supported this by providing their own unconditional cash transfers to households living in extreme poverty which are affected by severe food and nutrition insecurity during the lean season (Kreidler et al, 2022). These are

⁹ Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

¹⁰ Interviews with WFP staff members, November 2023.

¹¹ DCAN was set up with support from technical partners such as WFP and the World Bank (Watson, 2023).

¹² Interviews with WFP staff members, November 2023.

¹³ Its objectives are to: “(1) define national social protection, solidarity, and social cohesion policies; (2) coordinate implementation of the national social protection policy for the targeted poor and vulnerable populations; and (3) ensure universal access to basic services for these populations” (Watson, 2023: 44).

complementary programmes that align their objectives with the National Response Plan and respond to gaps in the government’s national programme (Kreidler et al, 2022).¹⁴

Table 1 lists some of the main social protection programmes operating in the country, both contributory and non-contributory. Note that WFP only plays a role in the non-contributory programmes.

Table 1: Main national social protection programmes in Mauritania

Implementer	Programme	Reach
Contributory social protection		
National Social Security Fund (Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale)	Old age pensions	9.3% ¹⁵
National Health Insurance Fund (Caisse Nationale de l'Assurance Maladie)	Health insurance for employees	Approximately 15% of the population
National Health Solidarity Fund (Caisse Nationale de Solidarité en Santé)	Health insurance for informal workers and the self-employed	Designed to cover 'missing middle' ¹⁶ 70% of population
Non-contributory social protection		
Taazour	A regular national safety net programme which provides quarterly conditional cash transfers ¹⁷ to households in extreme poverty over a five-year programme cycle ¹⁸	98,245 households ¹⁹ comprising 738,149 individuals
Taazour	Tekavoul also provides health insurance to the 100,000 poorest households	15% of the population
Taazour	Tekavoul-shock is a pilot expansion of both the value and coverage of Tekavoul	Supported 9,465 households during the 2021 lean season
Taazour	Temwine focuses on food security, with measures to strengthen geographical and financial access to foodstuffs, particularly through the establishment of shops for the sale of subsidized food and the development of village-level security food stocks (SAVS) (managed by CSA) and cereal banks	There are currently 1,800 Temwine stores. There are 3,000 SAVS sites in the country, but supply is dependent on circumstances ²⁰

14 Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

15 Percentage of population above statutory pensionable age receiving an old-age pension, latest available year (ILO, 2017). Active contributors to a pension scheme in the labour force aged 15+ were only 5.0 percent (ILO, 2017). Approximately 70 percent of Mauritanian's are engaged in informal labour (WFP, 2024).

16 The “missed middle” refers to non-poor informal households that are often overlooked by social protection programs, having not being qualified for traditional support targeted either at the poor or formal sectors. This demographic, which constitutes a significant portion of the population in some countries, faces unique challenges that necessitate tailored social protection strategies.

17 Conditional on participation in activities designed to promote knowledge of essential family practices and investment in early childhood development (Watson, 2023).

18 After the five years, the households that meet the programme selection criteria will be re-enrolled for a new five-year cycle of support, and those found to be no longer eligible are taken out of the programme.

19 The ambition is to reach the 100,000 poorest households (Watson, 2023).

20 Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

Implementer	Programme	Reach
CSA, overseen by Taazour	El Maouna is an annual shock-responsive social safety net programme providing unconditional cash transfers during the lean season	Approximately 65,000 households in 2022 and 67,000 in 2023
Ministry of National Education and Reform of the Education System	National School Feeding Programme (Programme National d'Alimentation Scolaire)	Approximately 100,000 children enrolled in 900 primary schools (Jan. 2024)

Source: ESCWA, 2023; Kreidler et al, 2022; Watson, 2023; ILO, 2017)

The non-governmental humanitarian programmes have a closer alignment with Tekavoul-shock and El Maouna due to their similar objectives and closer coordination under DCAN, than to the regular social safety net (Kreidler et al, 2022). Humanitarian actors have also traditionally provided the bulk of assistance to refugees, hence there are concerns about their access to services, given that humanitarian support continues to decline while the number of refugees increases (Watson, 2023).

Several key donors, such as the European Commission – through European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), United States, United Kingdom, Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), and the French Development Agency, are particularly active in supporting humanitarian response and social protection in Mauritania. The main sectors they have funded have been nutrition and food security, along with refugee response (Watson, 2023).

ECHO's Humanitarian Implementation Plan supported the lean season response and disaster preparedness; the World Bank's safety net programme is underpinned by the Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program multi-donor trust fund; BMZ contributes to the multi-donor trust fund and supports other shock-responsive social protection activities; the French Development Agency provides significant support for shock-responsiveness in Mauritania, particularly through Taazour and El Maouna (Watson, 2023).

The Social Registry

The national Social Registry was launched in 2016 by the Ministry of Economy and Finance. In recent years, it has been scaled up by Taazour so that it now covers all of Mauritania, (225,855 households in 2023) (World Bank, 2023; ESCWA, 2023; Watson, 2023). It has also started including Malian refugees (World Bank, 2023; Watson, 2023). The Social Registry receives financial and technical support from the World Bank (Watson, 2023) and WFP, UNHCR and United Nations Children's

Fund (UNICEF) – with WFP as one of the largest non-state “users” – for beneficiary targeting for Tekavoul and El Maouna, and a range of other programmes implemented by state and non-state entities (ESCWA, 2023; Kreidler et al, 2022). The Social Registry can be used by different actors thanks to efforts by WFP, the World Bank and others in strengthening the system, and of the country’s willingness and ability to take ownership of it, facilitating a more coherent response across social protection actors.²¹ The Social Registry is “currently used by 15 operational actors in the field as a basis for the initial identification of social assistance programme beneficiaries” (Watson, 2023: 44), especially WFP which has been instrumental in testing and improving it.²²

Some humanitarian programmes have opted not to use the Social Registry on its own for beneficiary identification purposes. This is because they have concerns around potential exclusion errors, although continuous efforts are being made with regular feedback mechanisms to continue strengthening the registry’s accuracy (Kreidler et al, 2022). Other issues include: “(1) the need to ensure rapid and inclusive updates of the database in order to capture changes in demographic characteristics of households and volatility in poverty and vulnerability indicators; (2) continuing to ensure the integration of wide and varied vulnerability criteria in order to meet the needs of a variety of social assistance programmes; and (3) strengthening systems and channels of communication between database users and providers” (Watson, 2023: 45).

Progress towards a national adaptive social protection system

Adaptive social protection systems “provide a holistic and sustainable response to climate and economic shocks and serve as a framework through which WFP aims to strengthen national capacities in nutrition interventions, school-based feeding programmes and resilience-building” (WFP, 2023b: 3).

The year 2022 was important for the government’s response to lean season support, as it was the first year that DCAN, which draws together national authorities and partners from different sectors,²³ coordinated the lean season response (WFP, 2023b; Watson, 2023). In July 2022, “the government validated its National Response Plan, which called for a mixed modality response (cash and in-kind food assistance), with [priority given to] cash transfers where markets are functional and resources are available” (WFP, 2023: 36). The lean season response was coordinated more effectively between actors as they harmonized their assistance methods, with better targeting, and therefore, coherent response to existing needs (WFP, 2023b).

As a result of the policies, structures, and programmes it has developed, Mauritania is seen as a “leader in the region in building shock-responsive mechanisms and linking social protection to both food security and refugee response, largely as a result of intensive interactions over the years among key stakeholders from government and partner organisations” (Watson, 2023: 6).

Over the past decade, the country has evolved from isolated humanitarian responses, entirely independent from social safety nets to the current more coherent approach, with regular support from the social safety nets to meet immediate humanitarian needs (Watson, 2023).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Members of the oversight committees include the Ministries of Interior, Economy, Finance, Agriculture, Livestock, Health, Rural Development, and Taazour (Watson, 2023).

Challenges remaining

Despite considerable efforts in working towards an adaptive social protection system, Mauritania faces challenges in terms of “coordination and leadership created by divergent priorities and interests of government entities working in the field of social protection” (WFP, 2023: 28; see also WFP Mauritania, 2023).²⁴ Long-term financing and resource mobilization remains a challenge, but a unique financial vehicle for responding to shocks was launched in 2022 through FNRCAN, with the aim of bringing together contributions from the government and donor partners. However, the FNRCAN financial tool needs to be perfected and adopted by the donors and the government.

Another key challenge involves coverage: prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, overall social protection coverage was just 6.6 percent, despite the country’s high prevalence of poverty (28.2 per cent), which rises to 50 per cent when looking at multi-dimensional poverty (WFP Mauritania, 2023). Further challenges include “a dispersed geographical distribution of government social safety net programs”, as well as actors working on isolated individual projects (WFP Mauritania, 2023: 10). As it moves to middle-income status, Mauritania will no longer qualify for the same levels of financial support, which may affect how the government prioritizes social protection financing.²⁵ The country also needs to enlarge the social protection system to make it shock-responsive, and to help build resilience to future shocks, which will require collaboration across sectors.²⁶



²⁴ Interviews with WFP staff members, November 2023.

²⁵ Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

²⁶ Ibid.

3. WFP's objectives and role

WFP has been present in Mauritania since 1964 and has been at the “forefront of supporting government in developing a national social protection system in the country” (WFP, 2023a; WFP 2023b: 36). In 2021, WFP repositioned its operations in support of the rollout of a national Adaptive Social Protection system, with interventions directed to establishing government-led shock-responsive safety nets that are nutrition sensitive, and gender transformative (WFP, 2022).

In line with WFP's 2021 social protection strategy, WFP in Mauritania is focusing on investing in strengthening the government's institutional capacities as part of its Social Protection Strategy 2023 (WFP Mauritania, 2023). WFP aims to strengthen national capacities in nutrition interventions, school-based feeding programmes and resilience-building within the framework of the country's Adaptive Social Protection system (WFP, 2023b). WFP also aims to save lives and preserve livelihoods by promoting resilience capacities and establishing a National Social Protection system that responds to structural vulnerabilities as well as cyclical shocks (WFP Mauritania, 2023).

It contributes to social protection through its nutrition, resilience and school feeding activities (WFP, 2023b).













WFP's 2019–2023 Country Strategic Plan focused on six interrelated Strategic Outcomes that contributed to Sustainable Development Goals 2 (Zero Hunger) and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). for the plan also supported the 12 building blocks of the national government's adaptive social protection system, by focusing on crisis response (Strategic Outcome 1), resilience building (Strategic Outcomes 2 to 6) and capacity strengthening (Strategic Outcome 5) – see Table 2. WFP is active in most of the 12 building blocks of a nationally led social protection system, especially those relating to systems architecture, where WFP is active in many related areas (policy and legislation; governance, capacity and coordination; platforms and infrastructure; planning and financing).²⁷ WFP is also involved in most aspects of knowledge and learning, and programme features – with advocacy, engagement and communication, monitoring, evaluation and learning, accountability, protection and assurance being the areas where it is least active.²⁸



















²⁷ Interviews with WFP staff members, November 2023.

²⁸ Ibid.

Table 2: Strategic Outcomes and key activities 2019–2023

Strategic outcomes	Key activities	WFP social protection building blocks
<p>1. Crisis-affected people, including refugees, are able to meet basic food and nutrition needs during and in the aftermath of a crisis <i>Focus area: Crisis response</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide an integrated assistance package, including food/cash assistance (conditional and/or unconditional), school meals, and preventive nutrition rations and moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) treatment to refugees - Provide food assistance and supplementary feeding to pandemic-affected populations/households 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Policy and Legislation  Governance, capacity and coordination  Platforms and infrastructure  Planning and financing  Assessments and analysis  Design of programme parameters  Registration and enrolment  Benefit delivery
<p>2. Food-insecure populations, including school-age children, have access to adequate and nutritious food all year <i>Focus area: Resilience-building</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide seasonal food assistance to food-insecure Mauritanian populations, including malnutrition prevention and treatment for children (623 months) and pregnant and lactating women and girls - Provide school meals to vulnerable Mauritanian children during the school year, in a way that relies on and stimulates local production (home-grown school feeding) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Policy and Legislation  Governance, capacity and coordination  Platforms and infrastructure  Planning and financing  Assessments and analysis  Design of programme parameters  Registration and enrolment  Benefit delivery
<p>3. Nutritionally vulnerable populations, including children and pregnant and breastfeeding women and girls, have improved nutritional status all year. <i>Focus area: Resilience-building</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - MAM treatment and cash transfers to pregnant and breastfeeding women and girls attending pre/post-natal care - Nutrition-related messaging to women and men care providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Policy and Legislation  Governance, capacity and coordination  Platforms and infrastructure  Planning and financing  Assessments and analysis  Design of programme parameters  Registration and enrolment  Benefit delivery

Strategic outcomes	Key activities	WFP social protection building blocks
<p>4. Food-insecure populations and communities exposed to climate shocks in targeted areas have more resilient livelihoods and sustainable food systems all year</p> <p><i>Focus area: Resilience-building</i></p>	<p>- Provide livelihood support to food-insecure and at-risk Mauritanian households, including the development or rehabilitation of natural productive assets, through an integrated, equitable and participatory community approach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Policy and Legislation  Governance, capacity and coordination  Platforms and infrastructure  Planning and financing  Assessments and analysis  Design of programme parameters  Registration and enrolment  Benefit delivery
<p>5. National institutions have strengthened capacities to manage food security, nutrition, and social protection policies and programmes, including an adaptive (shock-responsive) social protection system, by 2030</p> <p><i>Focus area: Capacity strengthening and resilience-building</i></p>	<p>- Provide training and technical support to governmental institutions to assist with the design and implementation of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) a permanent response planning scheme for food security and nutrition with consolidated early warning and coordination mechanisms; ii) a national shock-responsive, nutrition-sensitive and gender transformative safety-net system; and iii) effective preparedness and supply chains operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Policy and Legislation  Governance, capacity and coordination  Platforms and infrastructure  Planning and financing  Assessments and analysis  Design of programme parameters  Registration and enrolment
<p>6. Humanitarian and development partners have access to common services that permit them to reach and operate in targeted areas all year</p> <p><i>Focus area: Resilience-building</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide flight services to partners for humanitarian interventions - Provide on-demand logistics services to government, United Nations, and non-governmental partners to facilitate effective field operations (Cooperating Partner Agreements (CPA) Service Provision and platform activities) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Benefit delivery

Source: adapted from WFP, 2023a; WFP, 2023b

Future plans

WFP's new strategic priorities for the 2024–2028 Country Strategic Plan in support of WFP's social protection strategy are to:

1. strengthen the existing social protection system and its capacity to respond to shocks;
2. improve government understanding and commitment to nutrition-sensitive social protection; and
3. raise government awareness to expand the social protection system by integrating the resilience dimension (WFP Mauritania, 2023: 5).

The new integrated Country Strategic Plan outcomes (WFP, 2024) for 2024–2028 are:

- **Outcome 1:** Crisis-affected populations in targeted areas, including women and children in need of nutrition support, are better able to meet their urgent needs immediately before, during, and after shocks.
- **Outcome 2:** Communities vulnerable to shocks in targeted areas have sustainable livelihoods, access to basic services, strengthened human capital, reinforced markets, improved nutrition, and resilience to climate shocks by 2028.
- **Outcome 3:** By 2028, national institutions have strengthened capacity to establish a robust, effective, and adaptive social protection system, which includes school-based programmes, nutrition and food security policy.
- **Outcome 4:** Government partners and humanitarian and development actors support vulnerable people effectively and efficiently throughout the year.

WFP partnerships

WFP feels it adds value to its partnership with the government and other social protection partners (WFP Mauritania, 2023) because of its:

1. significant presence on the ground, often in remote and/or crisis-affected regions;
2. ability to rapidly scale up and provide logistics support, providing unique practical know-how, allowing them to help the government design and manage its own programmes;
3. monitoring and evaluation capabilities, from data collection to analysis (through its Research Assessment and Monitoring unit), particularly in understanding the nature of vulnerability;
4. expertise in food security and nutrition; and
5. ability to address the link between humanitarian work, development and peace (Nexus approach).

4. Activities and Results

This case study focuses on WFP's support to the development of Mauritania's national social protection system over the course of the 2019–2023 Country Strategic Plan. It looks at activities and results under Strategic Outcome 5 of the Country Strategic Plan (i.e., “National institutions have strengthened capacities to manage food security, nutrition, and social protection policies and programmes, including an adaptive and shock-responsive social protection system, by 2030”) as it best fits WFP's support to the national social protection system (as per WFP's corporate social protection strategy). It also focuses on WFP Mauritania's collaboration with the World Bank on the Social Registry and shock response, which national staff feel is an example of very successful collaboration in support of national social protection systems.

WFP has been providing operational and technical support to the government entities responsible for the national social protection system over the last few years, either directly or through its coordinating partners (WFP, 2023b; WFP, 2022). WFP is the government's partner of choice for implementation of part of its shock-responsive social protection programme (WFP, 2023b).

WFP works closely with both social protection bodies in the country – CSA and Taazour – as well as partners such as the World Bank and UNICEF, to put in place the major building blocks for a nationally led social protection system (WFP, 2023b). WFP has deployed a national consultant to support DCAN's coordinating bodies to ensure the overall functioning, including assisting with the coordination of regular implementation and monitoring committees, as well as bolstering coordination and collaboration among state and non-state actors (WFP, 2023b). WFP has also provided technical assistance and trained government staff, as well as seconding WFP staff to

relevant government bodies to provide expertise and establish an ongoing communication channel (Renaudin et al, 2023; WFP, 2023b).²⁹ An evaluation carried out by an independent external team noted that this support was overwhelmingly appreciated by those receiving it (Renaudin et al, 2023).

WFP's institutional and technical capacity support is focused on the following five essential adaptive social protection functions:

1. a reliable and consensual early warning system;
2. effective food security and nutrition preparedness and response;
3. targeting of shock-responsive safety nets;
4. an effective risk financing mechanism; and
5. improved common adaptive social protection delivery mechanisms (WFP, 2022).

An evaluation of WFP's contribution to adaptive social protection in Mauritania found that its work has helped bring together humanitarian and development actors, with significant progress made on each of these key areas (Watson, 2023: 49; Watson et al. 2021).

To further strengthen the national social protection system, WFP has followed a dual approach where, “WFP channelled a considerable proportion of its interventions directly through government structures or through WFP own channels where most appropriate” (WFP, 2023b: 36).

Some activities and results WFP has achieved in this area over the last few years are outlined in the following paragraphs.

²⁹ Interviews with WFP staff members, November 2023.

A reliable and consensual early warning system

WFP is very involved in supporting the CSA's early warning system.³⁰ Through its partnership with the CSA, WFP has “transferred responsibility for the production and analysis of food security data at the national level to the Needs Analysis Committee (CAB) of the National Food and Nutritional Crisis Response Mechanism (DCAN) through the Observatoire de la Sécurité Alimentaire (OSA) [Food Security Observatory]” (WFP, 2023b: 10). WFP support includes providing the OSA with technical support for setting up a data server to manage all early warning system tools and monitoring the response, as well as 150 tablets for data collection, storage and transfer to help with the functionality and efficiency of the existing early warning system (WFP, 2023b; WFP, 2022).³¹ Helping to establish and expand community sentinel sites, which are used to collect price and climate data is intended to “complement existing tools by generating localized, community-driven and high-frequency information that can trigger alerts in case of sudden onset shock” (WFP, 2022: 23).

Effective food security and nutrition preparedness and response

WFP supported the establishment and functioning of DCAN, which replaced the Food Security and Nutrition Groups, and which successfully coordinated the lean-season response in 2022 and 2023 (WFP, 2022; Watson, 2023). WFP assisted DCAN by supporting it with the development of a national response plan³² every year, and a methodological guide for the response, for example (WFP, 2022).³³



30 Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

31 Ibid.

32 The National Response Plan is a government-drafted document, formulated based on the findings of the Cadre Harmonisé process, and used to inform geographical and beneficiary targeting for the pre-lean season and lean season response (WFP, 2023b).

33 Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

Targeting of shock-responsive safety nets

Since 2018, WFP has been one of the primary users of the Social Registry to target beneficiaries for its seasonal lean season response. WFP has supported the provision of regular feedback to the Social Registry to correct for inclusion and exclusion errors (WFP, 2023b). WFP has also “allowed the Social Registry to function well and become more legitimate in the eyes of government and other strategic partners, which has led to the support of several actors including the government to adopt it in the targeting of their programmes” (WFP, 2023b: 28; World Bank & WFP, 2023).³⁴ In 2022, as a result of “continuous improvement of the targeting criteria of the Social Registry, WFP was able to accelerate the targeting process as well as increase value for money” (WFP, 2023b: 34). WFP was also involved in helping co-finance analysis of the Social Registry and is involved with ongoing updating of the register (WFP Mauritania, 2023; WFP, 2022).³⁵

An effective risk financing mechanism

WFP is also actively involved in supporting the National Crisis Response Fund (FNRCAN) which is intended to “consolidate the resources mobilized by the government and its partners for the financing of the National Response Plan and to promote government leadership.” WFP helps to finalize its manual, via an international secondment (in collaboration with a national expert funded by the World Bank) (WFP, 2023b: 10).³⁶ In addition, the “African Risk Capacity (ARC) is being supported by WFP to link it with the preparedness and response national mechanism and was used in 2020 for a drought response (US\$167,000)” (Watson, 2023: 51). Mauritania was one of the first countries to benefit from WFP’s climate risk insurance coverage through this mechanism (WFP, 2021). Looking forward, WFP will proactively support the government in developing a costed action plan for the implementation of the new National Strategy for Social Protection (WFP Mauritania, 2023).



34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Interviews with WFP staff members, November 2023.

Improvements to common social protection delivery mechanisms

In 2021, WFP developed a study that supported the government to “bring together for the first-time state and non-state actors involved in [social] protection to launch an inclusive dialogue aimed at better articulating and harmonizing the various existing social safety net programmes in Mauritania” (WFP, 2022: 24). It led to several options for the articulation of social safety nets which were to be tested in Guidimakha before being scaled up (WFP, 2022).

Capacity building efforts under other Strategic Outcomes

It is not only activities under Strategic Outcomes 5 that WFP has used to strengthen national institutions’ capacity over the years, but also through its activities across all its Strategic Objectives. WFP has been working with the government, providing technical, financial, and logistical support to their work in this area, as well as complementary programming (WFP, 2023b). For example, in 2022, under Strategic Objective 1, WFP collaborated with UNHCR to support the government to integrate refugees into its Social Registry so that the most vulnerable refugee households could benefit from regular social cash transfers (WFP, 2023b).

Under Strategic Objective 2, WFP used the Social Registry for targeting the most vulnerable in the pre-lean season and lean season response, in addition to complementary community-based targeting to minimize exclusion errors, and door-to-door verifications to maximize targeting accuracy (WFP, 2023b). At the government’s request, WFP developed a new methodology for geographical targeting that enabled enhanced coverage and equity among communities by introducing criteria for semi-urban localities, a process that was conducted for the first time within DCAN (WFP, 2023b). “The [WFP] intervention supported the horizontal and vertical expansion of national safety nets (Tekavoul and El Maouna) to households facing acute vulnerabilities and continued to improve and promote harmonized approaches for using the national Social Registry for household targeting” (WFP, 2022: 16; WFP, 2021).

WFP also directed a portion of its assistance through the government’s El Maouna programme to enhance government capacity to respond to shocks (WFP, 2023b). WFP provided “technical support to the CSA throughout the implementation of the assistance, including on geographical and household targeting, verifications, preparation of payment lists, and the design and rollout of monitoring and evaluation surveys” (WFP, 2023b: 20). As a result, the government led the cash-based response for 34,000 food insecure people, covering the entire project cycle (WFP, 2023b). Over time, WFP plans to scale up the proportion of lean season assistance delivered directly by the government while continuing to provide technical assistance to enhance the state’s readiness and response capacity (WFP, 2023b).

Collaboration with the World Bank and other key actors

An important part of WFP's work to strengthen the national government's social protection strategy has been its ongoing collaboration with the World Bank. Since 2016, WFP's partnership with the World Bank evolved from an operational collaboration without a common vision to a joint strategy based on the "establishment of a national adaptive social protection system, combined with the implementation of integrated and multi-year interventions to strengthen community resilience in favour of local and refugee populations, as well as the maintenance of strong response capacities to crises" (Renaudin et al, 2023; World Bank & WFP, 2023: 3). WFP has worked closely with the World Bank to "leverage discussions and action vis-à-vis the Mauritanian Government's need to strengthen the national social protection system to rapidly respond to humanitarian needs in the event of shocks or stressors" (WFP, 2023b: 29). The partnership involves a joint memorandum of understanding (MOU), joint vision and annual workplans, and a shared senior technical expert in adaptive social protection who guides the two agencies' technical teams, which allows them to work together to better support the government financially and technically (WFP, 2023b; World Bank & WFP, 2023; WFP, 2022).³⁷ The first MOU was signed in 2018, with the most recent being for the period 2023–2027 (World Bank & WFP, 2023).

Their work together under the first MOU led to, among other things, institutional support for DCAN; support for the early warning system; support for financing systems; technical support for the Social Registry; support for updating the National Social Protection Strategy; and improved coordination between humanitarian

interventions and shock-responsive social safety net programmes (World Bank & WFP, 2023). Technical support for the various governmental social protection tools has involved the presence of WFP and World Bank staff in ministry teams.³⁸ Coordination between WFP, the World Bank, and the government over the last 15 years has helped bring about significant changes to the government's approach to social protection, from being solely about food distributed in villages without a list to the well-functioning social protection system it is today.³⁹ The support provided to the Mauritanian Government by WFP and the World Bank to help strengthen social protection tools is technical and does not replace the government's own work.⁴⁰

Under the current WFP–World Bank MOU, the two institutions aim to progressively enlarge the shock-responsiveness of the social protection system, by strengthening the five essential functions of a shock-responsive social protection system (early warning; preparation and planning of responses; targeting; financing; and distribution mechanisms); continuing to actively support development and implementation of the new National Social Protection Strategy; working on productive social safety nets; and other cross-functional fields of collaboration such as linking social protection and humanitarian interventions (World Bank & WFP, 2023; Watson, 2023).⁴¹

WFP has also worked with other partners to support this aim. For example, with UNICEF, WFP has provided policy guidance to "reinforce a Mauritanian National Social Protection System that unites humanitarian and social protection capacities" (WFP, 2023b: 36; WFP, 2021).⁴² WFP is also working with UNHCR and the government on a roadmap for refugee inclusion in social protection.⁴³

³⁷ Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

5. Lessons Learned

The lessons in this section are developed from the literature review of relevant documents and the key informant interviews.

USE THE GOVERNMENT'S SOCIAL PROTECTION INSTRUMENTS TO STRENGTHEN THE SYSTEM

Use of the government's social protection instruments can encourage others to do the same, which strengthens the national system. WFP was among the first users of the Social Registry data, and WFP's involvement, advocacy, and feedback on this use has led to 20 to 25 other organizations using the Social Registry to target their crisis responses in the country (WFP, 2023b).⁴⁴ "Many stakeholders agree on the fact that without the support of WFP, the Social Registry of Mauritania would not be at the level it is today", as a key pillar of the social protection system (WFP Mauritania, 2023: 14).⁴⁵ Given WFP's reach, it was the best possible choice to test the Social Registry. The organization's ability to fund technical support for suggested improvements means that WFP doesn't only leave identification of issues at the diagnostic level.⁴⁶ WFP's use of the Social Registry helps increase government confidence in its social protection tools and reassures donors of its validity. Their work together to improve the systems, where necessary, builds others' confidence in the system (WFP, 2023b).⁴⁷

ADDING VALUE THROUGH COLLABORATION

Formal collaboration with the World Bank to support the government's social protection efforts has been a successful strategy. The collaboration between WFP and the World Bank around adaptive social protection systems in Mauritania has been "considered as a model example of partnership" and has meant that WFP and the World Bank have an extended reach in efforts to enlarge the social protection system (Watson, 2023: 49).⁴⁸ The successful partnership has been driven by successive personnel in leadership positions interested in collaboration.⁴⁹ It is formalized and built on strong foundations including the MOUs, shared work plans and other common document. There is also a shared technical expert who brings cohesion, which adds value, supports the strategic vision (Watson, 2023),⁵⁰ and is an important component of the collaboration in Mauritania. The technical expertise has enabled alignment on support for the government's adaptive social protection system to be stronger than it otherwise would be.⁵¹ Having a shared consultant is a valuable approach for cultivating a real sense of collaboration and cohesion for the two organizations' strategic ambitions.⁵² This work is bolstered by a shared understanding of the importance of adaptive social protection systems and of each other's comparative advantages and limitations due to their mandates.⁵³ This strong and formalized partnership is an unusual case, and is a positive force within the Mauritanian system.⁵⁴

⁴⁴ Interviews with WFP staff members, November 2023.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

⁴⁷ Interviews with WFP staff members, November 2023.

⁴⁸ Interviews with WFP staff members, November 2023.

⁴⁹ Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

⁵⁰ Interviews with WFP staff members, November 2023.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

⁵⁴ Interviews with WFP staff member, November 2023.

For instance, the two institutions complement each other (one more operational, one more focused on policy and finance) and bring their competitive advantages to the table to operationalize programmes and provide technical support to the government.⁵⁵ For example, WFP is the largest shock-responsive actor in the country. Using the Social Registry (which the World Bank helped to establish) has created an environment that encourages its widespread use.⁵⁶ The collaboration has given both actors a greater chance at succeeding in the aims of supporting the government's adaptive social protection system.⁵⁷ WFP's collaboration with the World Bank should be capitalized on through consistent regular meetings and gaining feedback from the experience, including using a joint expert, so that its success can be replicated elsewhere.⁵⁸

Another example of the power of collaboration comes from WFP's work with UNHCR, the World Bank, and the government, to include refugees in the Social Registry.⁵⁹ It is only possible to achieve this level of policy impact when organizations work together, and the message comes from multiple, unified voices.⁶⁰

CAPACITY STRENGTHENING IS IMPROVED WITH A DEDICATED TEAM

Having staff dedicated specifically to social protection work makes it easier to strengthen institutional capacities. Leveraging WFP's social protection expertise, and harnessing it across the wider WFP Mauritania Programme Unit, has helped to encourage more concerted technical assistance and policy dialogue with government counterparts.⁶¹ WFP has established an institutional support team within the Programme unit to provide technical support (WFP Mauritania, 2023), which has played a key role in positioning social protection technical expertise in key policy-level discussion and decision forums.⁶² More than five WFP staff are dedicated to the social protection and systems strengthening agenda in Mauritania. This is a testament to prioritization of social protection in the WFP Mauritania office, in response to a similar approach at government level.⁶³

Political will has been important, as the push for social protection at the top government levels has also been motivated (to a certain extent) by the personalities and interests of senior leadership – such as the President of Mauritania, whose administration has treated social protection as a policy priority. The institutionalization of policies, strategies, budgets, and systems are crucial to ensure that social protection gains are not specific to any one administration.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

58 Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Interviews with WFP staff members, November 2023.



THE NEED FOR INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY

Regular government staff turnover in important decision-making roles forces WFP and partners to engage multiple times with new government teams on the same issues.⁶⁴ Keeping the national social protection agenda moving forward relies on a high degree of institutional memory, which current staff turnover rates prevent (WFP, 2023b; WFP, 2023c; Renaudin et al, 2023: 32).⁶⁵ To deal with the issues caused by government staff turnover, WFP seconded a staff member to the CSA, its principal partner, to support local institutions and have an ongoing communication channel (WFP, 2023b). WFP also seconded staff to other relevant government social protection actors, such as the nutrition section of the National Disaster Management Authority and the school meals programme, which has helped to progress development of the social protection system (WFP, 2022).⁶⁶ A further challenge is the workstreams are isolated between the government structures that work on social protection.⁶⁷

IT TAKES TIME TO DEVELOP AWARENESS OF WFP AS A SOCIAL PROTECTION ACTOR

It takes time, and greater awareness, for external (and internal) actors to recognize WFP as a social protection actor. Despite all the positive progress that WFP has achieved supporting social protection in Mauritania, social protection is not seen as part of its main area of expertise.

WFP remains a major humanitarian actor in the country. The fact that “its leadership role and technical skills in the field of food crisis management are widely recognized by partners in Mauritania” has enabled WFP to provide effective institutional support for the adaptive social protection system (Renaudin et al, 2023). However, through a perception study and interviews with stakeholders, a recent evaluation found that “[a] though, generally speaking, its operational and logistical means and its coordination know-how are generally perceived by partners as its own assets, this is not yet the case with regard to its efforts to support institutional capacity building in the area of social protection” (Renaudin et al, 2023: vi).

This illustrates that there is a lack of sufficient communication, and WFP’s strategic positioning and action are not sufficiently visible at the governmental level, despite its success in building trust and good relations with the government (Renaudin et al, 2023).⁶⁸ As a result, “there is room for WFP to improve its strategic positioning in the areas of institutional capacity strengthening and resilience” (WFP, 2023c).

One way to do this is for WFP to strengthen evidence generation (and dissemination) around its social protection work.⁶⁹ Changing perspectives about social protection and WFP’s role in supporting this takes time, and appropriate expectations must be set with donors and WFP teams around how change happens, and how long it takes.⁷⁰ The lessons WFP has learnt in Mauritania can help to better inform support of social protection in future in-country strategies, and as an example for other WFP country offices.

64 Ibid.

65 Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

66 Interviews with WFP staff members, November 2023.

67 Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

68 Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

69 Interviews with WFP staff members, November 2023.

70 Interview with WFP staff member, November 2023.

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Annex: Key Informant Interviews

Key Informant Interview (KII) 1, WFP Staff (2023). Interview by Brigitte Rohwerder conducted on 7 November 2023 and written comments. Case study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Mauritania.

Key Informant Interview (KII) 2, WFP Staff (2023). Interview by Brigitte Rohwerder conducted on 8 November 2023 and written comments. Case study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Mauritania.

Key Informant Interview (KII) 3, WFP Staff (2023). Interview by Brigitte Rohwerder conducted on 10 November 2023 and written comments. Case Study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Mauritania.

Key Informant Interview (KII) 4, WFP Partner (2023). Interview by Emilia Fernandez conducted on 12 December 2023. Case study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Mauritania.

Key Informant Interview (KII) 5, WFP Staff (2024). Written comments February 2024. Case study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Mauritania.

Key Informant Interview (KII) 6, WFP Staff (2024). Written comments February 2024. Case study on WFP's Support to the National Social Protection in Mauritania.



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