



SAHEL SOCIAL PROTECTION JOINT PROJECT

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Delivering shock-responsive social protection in the Sahel

Urban social cash transfer response amid rising food inflation – Lessons from Nouakchott, Mauritania

In 2023, people in Nouakchott, Mauritania experienced a steep increase in the cost of food and an overall upward rise in the cost of living, putting many at risk of acute food insecurity and malnutrition as they struggled to meet their basic needs. WFP responded by working with the Government of Mauritania to pilot the extension of one of the country's national shock-responsive social safety net programmes - El Maouna¹ - to households in the Mauritanian capital.

Urbanization of poverty and food insecurity

Over 61 per cent of Mauritania's population lives in urban areas², the majority in the country's capital – Nouakchott. With 46 per cent of the country's

urban population facing multidimensional poverty,³ extending social protection programmes to urban areas stands to reach a larger share of the population who, as seen in 2023 amidst rising food prices, were at risk of facing acute food insecurity and malnutrition.

¹ Established in 2017, El Maouna is an annual, shock-responsive social protection programme that provides unconditional cash transfers during the lean season. It is implemented by the Food Security Commission (Commissariat à la Sécurité Alimentaire – CSA), under the governance the government entity, Taazour. In 2023, El Maouna reached around 67,000 households during the lean season.

² World Bank. 2023. *The World Bank in Mauritania*. Available: [Mauritania Overview: Development news, research, data | World Bank](#)

³ Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI). 2023. *Global MPI Country Briefing: Mauritania*. Available: [OPHI Country Briefing 2023: Mauritania](#)

More and more, economic activity and work opportunities are concentrating in and around urban and peri-urban areas. Rural-to-urban migration is also driving up urbanization, as people – predominantly youth – in rural and more secluded areas seek higher standards of living and better paid job opportunities in cities.

Nonetheless, according to the latest *Cadre Harmonisé* (CH) results from March 2025, the projections for the number of people in Phase 3 to 5 of acute food insecurity and malnutrition (IPC3+) between June and August 2025 is expected to reach 590,452, of whom 121,884 (20.6 per cent) are in Nouakchott.⁴

Rising food prices felt across Nouakchott

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 and in the months that followed, market and supply chain disruptions were deeply felt across Mauritania, well into early 2023. Mauritania, like other countries in the Sahel, is disproportionately exposed to international market volatility, as local food production remains limited.

In fact, around 70 per cent of all food needs in Mauritania are met by imports, with up to 80 per cent of national consumption requirements of basic grains alone covered by imports, most of which transit through Black Sea ports and were therefore subsequently and further disrupted on the heels of the Ukraine crisis.⁵ A more expensive food import bill for Mauritania in 2022-2023 was also the result of higher fuel and transport costs, with higher prices passed on to consumers, including those living in cities.

Piloting the expansion of social cash transfers in urban settings

From January to May 2023, WFP, together with the National Food Security Commission (*Commissariat à la Sécurité Alimentaire* – CSA), conducted a pilot project of urban cash transfers ('cash-in-hand') in Nouakchott, leveraging one of the country's

national shock-responsive safety nets programme, *El Maouna*.⁶

The pilot intervention served to document how a large-scale cash response in urban centers could take place at a future stage. Some **20,619 households (over 120,000 people)** were identified to receive four distributions, each one amounting to 500 MRU (US\$ 12.70) per person per month to help meet household food and nutrition needs.

A twin-track delivery of cash transfers

Developed with the Governments of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, with WFP and UNICEF support, the **twin-track approach**⁷ is a methodology aimed at better responding to the multiple challenges in implementing shock-responsive social protection in the Sahel. It has been developed and piloted since 2020 as part of the Joint UNICEF-WFP project 'Responding to COVID-19 through Social Protection Systems in the Sahel – Towards addressing the Socioeconomic Impacts of Multiple Shocks' (Joint Project), financed by BMZ through KfW.

The twin-track approach enables the delivery of cash transfers, to the extent possible through national delivery systems, referred to as **Track 1**. However, where government systems are overstretched, when they become disrupted, or where the government has no access to certain parts of the country, the delivery of cash assistance is carried out by WFP and UNICEF, together with their implementing partners, guaranteeing a continued flow of essential cash assistance. This is referred to as **Track 2**, or the 'aligned track', as all cash assistance delivered via Track 2 remains aligned with and coordinated under the government's programmes.

The idea behind two tracks working in parallel is to boost support to – and through – existing social protection systems in place, all while providing capacity strengthening support to those

⁴ CH/IPC. 2025. *Cadre harmonisé d'analyse et d'identification des zones à risque et des populations en insécurité alimentaire au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest - Mauritanie* (08-03-2025).

⁵ AgFlow. 2023. *Mauritania: Wheat is the second most imported product*. Available: [Mauritania: Wheat Is the 2nd Most Imported Product - AgFlow](#)

⁶ Video interview with WFP and Government staff presenting the urban pilot project: [Urban cash case study EN.mp4](#)

⁷ WFP and UNICEF. 2023. *All the right tracks. Delivering shock responsive social protection: lessons from the COVID-19 response*. Available: [All the right tracks. Delivering shock responsive social protection: lessons from the COVID-19 response | World Food Programme](#)

government systems – including delivery systems, targeting tools, monitoring and evaluations processes and tools, and grievance and redress mechanisms. WFP working in alignment with Mauritania's El Maouna shock-responsive social safety net programme is one such example.

The urban cash response pilot in Nouakchott involved WFP delivering cash transfers through its own channels (Track 2), while collaborating with the CSA and remaining fully aligned with El Maouna. In doing so, WFP supported the extension of El Maouna coverage in urban areas, an area not previously covered by the programme. Targeting and monitoring modalities were a joint effort between WFP and the Government, allowing government systems to be tested and improved as part of the urban pilot response. It also served as an opportunity to pilot targeting and delivery modalities in an urban setting as well as reinforced WFP's and government's learning on how to best support households with different types and levels of vulnerability, compared to those living in rural areas.

Leveraging Mauritania's Social Registry for a more informed and timely response

WFP was one of the earlier users of Mauritania's **Social Registry**, using it for targeting beneficiaries for the lean season response since 2018. As part of these efforts, WFP has provided continuous support to the Social Registry to improve the household registration and identification processes and targeting methodologies so that it stays up to date. Before the start of pilot project, support from the Joint Project had helped the Social Registry expand its coverage to Nouakchott communes.

These efforts proved fruitful, allowing WFP to employ the use of different vulnerability criteria and a closer look at household finances and consumption trends adapted to urban areas to receive assistance amidst rising food prices – compared to criteria normally employed to identify vulnerable households in rural areas, such as considering agricultural assets and land ownership.

Ensuring alignment with the national lean season response

The urban pilot project mirrored the monthly delivery of payments and the amounts paid out by El Maouna, as part of the wider national lean season response. The urban cash response also remained aligned in terms of the total household payment benefit amount, calculated according to the size of the household as opposed to having a uniform payout amount, as well as adhered to the minimum and maximum payment thresholds set by the Government of the *El Maouna* response.

While WFP delivered the cash transfers (Track 2), the CSA facilitated the coordination with national entities, including the municipalities where the distributions took place. The CSA also organized the operation at the distribution sites, monitored the distributions, and ensured community outreach and verification.

Key lessons learned to inform future urban responses

The urban pilot shed light on operational difficulties, including in reaching beneficiary households and managing substantial crowds in the distribution sites, especially as it concerned cash-in-hand modalities. This underscores the compelling advantages of exploring digital cash transfers, where available, in urban settings.

Improved **community outreach and community feedback modalities** were also identified, including to support municipal authorities in facilitating cash distributions in contexts of large groups of people – beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries alike – living in close proximity to each other. Further, the involvement of local authorities and community leaders throughout the process eased security, improved site organisation, and enhanced community outreach.

The urban cash operation in Nouakchott has also proven that the Social Registry is an **effective tool to ensure timely and accurate response** to emergencies and vulnerable populations in urban areas as well in Mauritania at large, enabling more precise targeting and transparent management of limited social assistance resources.

The urban response further highlighted the advantages of robust coordination and synergistic efforts between WFP and UNICEF in their supporting roles to the CSA, El Maouna and the Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood, and Family (MASEF). Embracing a collaborative approach, WFP also adopted and built on the urban distribution model of UNICEF and the MASEF initially tailored for individuals living with disabilities. Moreover, a cross-checking of beneficiary lists between the two agencies was also conducted with the aim of reaching a larger share of the population.

Operational lessons learned also include an accent on the importance of exploring the use of digital transfers given high rates of mobile Internet penetration. In this regard, there were opportunities identified for more proactive engagement through communication channels with beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, including on how to contact and identify them using mobile devices. Thanks to high mobile connectivity rates, WFP was able to collect information from households in real time, update them and ensure a follow-up of payment delivery, as well as capture feedback from beneficiaries during the course of the distributions, allowing for a more effective intervention.

The urban response helped underscore the **different dimensions in which urban households are vulnerable to food insecurity**, compared to rural households, where most of the yearly lean season response is currently concentrated. For instance, the pilot reaffirmed that that urban food insecurity is easily impacted by sudden changes in food prices and in food supplies made available through local markets. Mauritania heavily relies on imports to meet its food needs, so sudden supply chain interruptions and price hikes can leave urban households with little alternative but to forego certain food items or diminish their food intake.

Contrary to rural households, urban households are for the most part unable to partially meet their food needs through their own food productions. This experience underscored the need to more closely monitor food market and price fluctuations, exploring in turn the viability for early actions ahead of future market disruptions.

The pilot exercise also shed light on the importance of having all municipalities actively engaged during all stages of the operation. This is considering perceived confusion among communities due to different types of support being delivered in the same communities by different actors and programmes. In terms of alleviating confusion on beneficiary selection, there were also opportunities to add more detailed surveys to better target households based on the specific needs of communities. The existence of multiple toll-free numbers (from different partners) also led to some beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries having to navigate how to seek information and access grievance redress mechanisms as needed.

Finally, this pilot expansion of El Maouna to urban households, together with UNICEF and MASEF efforts to reach urban households with people living with disabilities, also reflects a move towards recognizing the importance of incorporating urban households in social safety net programmes.

Food consumption scores and use of negative coping strategies

The urban pilot intervention aimed to support households with the purchase of essential food items, to help ensure dietary diversity to improve access to basic services and to supplement incomes. The high mobile phone penetration rates in Nouakchott was an opportunity to use mobile technologies to collect data on vulnerability levels among recipient households as well as to monitor the delivery of payments and collect beneficiary feedback during distributions.

Post-distribution monitoring demonstrated that, among the households receiving cash transfers, the percentage of those classified as having an *acceptable* food consumption score increased from 54 percent at the baseline to 66 percent of households at the endline.

A case for continued urban shock-responsive cash response

Extending social protection programmes to urban areas allows to reach a larger share of the population that, as was the case in 2023, finds itself facing acute food insecurity and malnutrition risks.

This not only represents an opportunity to continue shock-responsive cash response in urban areas in general, but also to consider expanding social protection programmes in urban areas as part of Mauritania's regular social safety net

programme – *Tekavoul* – which until recently only supported households in rural areas.

Tekavoul now supports **42,000 households** in Nouakchott. This current process of distributing urban cash to the most vulnerable households through the Tekavoul programme also points to what is a logical continuation of the work to update the Social Registry data.

All in all, this urban shock-responsive pilot project stands to help inform an ongoing expansion of minimum levels of social safety net coverage into cities.

