



# ■ Mauritania

Right to Food and Food  
Sovereignty

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## SECTION ONE: METHODOLOGY

### 1. Preface

This paper discusses the question of Right to Food and Food Sovereignty in Mauritania, as part of the Arab Watch Report on the Right to Food in the Arab Region. Based on the AWR methodology, the authors undertook several research, investigative, and analytical tasks, not limited to a literature review of reports and data from various sources, meetings with authorities on the issue, and analysis.

### 2. Methodological Considerations

As the first serious investigation by CSOs of the status of the right to food in Mauritania and lacking reliable data on food security, it will attempt to present an illustrate available information on the question from the perspective of Mauritanian civil society, whose reports are merely contributing to advocacy and do not affect much change.

Thus, it is not suitable for this report to undertake an active an interactive approach; rather, it will delve into major sources and the AWR 2018/2019 Background Paper on the links between food sovereignty and food democracy and provide an in-depth analysis of other reports and literature and related national documents, strategies, policies, and reports.

The paper will examine sectoral documents related to food security and safety, other medium and long term strategies, databases and reports of recognized international and national institutions such as the World Bank and FAO, and surveys and data from relevant bodies such as the National Bureau of Statistics and the most recent Food Security Commission. In addition, meetings were organized with resource persons, including consultants, experts, academics, retired specialists, civil society activists, and organizations active in food safety and security. Finally, it will identify target ministries, departments, and local, regional, and international and regional civil organizations.

### 3. Position

This paper does not aim to be merely an academic document, despite the importance of the issue, nor does it provide the typical information found in the literature of relevant international organizations on food security data and statistics in Mauritania. However, it aims to use this knowledge as a tool for

advocacy from a civil society perspective, in order to change the situation in a progressive manner. In other words, it aims to make use of data in a manner that helps diagnose the situation and provide solutions appropriate to the overall situation of food insecurity.

### 4. Methodological Challenges

- **Lack of statistics and data;**
- **Access difficulties;**
- **Lack of coordination and trust between CSOs and the governmental sector, considering the problem as secondary, not fundamental or critical;**
- **Overlap of concepts, such as food security and food sovereignty, with those of poverty and social security;**
- **Overlap of powers between various bodies concerned with food security, such as ministries, commissions, and offices;**
- **Overlap of the rights-based approach to the right to food with citizenship rights, which are often exploited through propaganda and political patronage and devoid of their human rights content;**
- **Confusion between the concept of the right to food, on one hand, and food access, provision, and safety, on the other;**
- **Multiplicity of approaches and their ineffectiveness (human rights, legal, social, economic, and even commercial approach, etc.)**

### 5. Research Questions

- **What is the situation of the «right to food» and characteristics of lack of «food sovereignty» in Mauritania?**
- **What are the key agricultural and pastoral policies and their impact on food security in Mauritania?**
- **What are the types of property ownership? And what is their impact on food production?**
- **Is food security a local, national issue or is it external and governed by external developments? It is thus a matter of national sovereignty?**
- **What are the main steps and actions taken so far in this regard? How can they be evaluated?**
- **What does the future of the «right to food» and «food sovereignty» in Mauritania look like?**

## SECTION TWO: INTRODUCTION

### 1. Introduction: From Food Security to Food Sovereignty

The «right to food» and «food sovereignty» are two new concepts. Food sovereignty is derived from the right to food for all, emphasizing the economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights of groups and peoples and proposes political, legal, and strategic alternatives<sup>1</sup> (security, sufficiency, access, and safe utilization). The two concepts have become widely used in development literature<sup>2</sup> since the beginning of the new millennium, due to the major challenges posed by the globalization of food and dietary systems, which, intentionally or not, introduced a new phase. This research paper will attempt to clarify their key characteristics in the food governance process in Mauritania and its rapid and successive developments, which is often dictated by reciprocal and bilateral relations between the State and its partners while defining food patterns. Nutrition has become more and more a site of competition and trade. On the other hand, civil society movements began highlighting the negative repercussions of globalization, which, under the neoliberal system, consecrates dependency and deepens inequality, while a small minority enjoys the vast share of profits at the expense of the great majority of society.<sup>3</sup>

«The right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, have physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.»

Both concepts, ‘the right to food’ and ‘food sovereignty,’ are clearly based on international human

1 Dr. Azzam Mahjoub and Mohamed Monther Belgith, “Background Paper,” Arab Watch Report 2018/2019 on the Right to Food in the Arab Region, ANND, 2019.

2 Jean Ziegler, *The Fight for the Right to Food: Lessons Learned*, The Graduate Institute Geneva Publications, 2011.

3 François Houtart, Samir Amin, “MONDIALISATION DES RÉSISTANCES ET DES LUTTES,” Arabic translation by Saad al-Tawil, Madbouli Press, Cairo, 2004.

rights law and international humanitarian law. This human rights approach considers that food is not like other commodities.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the question should be viewed differently, focusing on food as a political issue and linking the right to food to other human rights such as the right to health, environment, education, work, and so on. The approach should promote «food sovereignty» as a catalyst for «progressive» political and social change in the design, implementation, and evaluation of public policies, making them fairer and more just,<sup>5</sup> especially in the South.

Following this framework, the adapted approach will be a mix of the historical and analytical dimensions. Food and nutritional security have long served as a fundamental determinant in Mauritanian nomadic and desert life, especially after the state was established. Its most important characteristic until today is that the question of food was and remains a question of value. The question of food was a social problem until recently, with the priority given to women and children. Food became linked to decency of the sponsor providing it. Men and boys, on the other hand, are secondary in most Mauritanian communities.

Climate, as well, remained a key determinant in the status of food, generally framing the desert lifestyle of Mauritians since before the establishment of the modern state. Several mechanisms had existed to sponsor and provide food, ensuring food security. Social mechanisms such as al-Lawha, Itkhotir, Wankala, and Iskata, in addition to immigration and collective care, are different according to the various Arab and African communities and the division of social work.

As the modern state was being formed, the question of food security was seen as pivotal and dominated

4 Atallah Ben Massoud, Abdul Qader Mourad, Boubakr Sharbi, Athar tahrir al-tijara fi Itar al-monathama al-alamiya lil tijara ala al-qita al-zira'i: Dirasat halat al-dal al-namiyah wal jaza'ir [Impact of Agricultural Liberalization in the WTO Framework on the Agricultural Sector: Case studies on developing countries and Algeria.

5 Jalal Khsheib, Al-Dawla wal mojtama' al-madani: Houdoud al-ta'thir wal ta'athor wal tawawwor al-fikri wal tabalwor al-nathari li thahirat al-mojtama' al-madani [The State and Civil Society: Limits of impact, intellectual development, and theoretical conception in the civil society phenomenon], Idrak Center for Studies and Consultations, 2016.

government policies and direction since 1958 until today. It was enshrined by the first government since 1964, which set up the Food Security Commission, whose latest structure was established by Decree 198-2008. It is a public institution with legal personality and administrative and financial autonomy, steered by a Supervisory Council. The Commission was first established in 1982 through the merger of the Mauritanian Office for Grains and the Food Assistance Commission. Its tasks include ensuring food security during the lean drought years. However, its powers had been shared since the 1970s between various other institutions and bodies and had several names. In 1973, it switched from being the Food Security Commission to the Commission for Food Security and Social Protection, then back to the Food Security Commission, then again to the Commission for Social Protection and Food Security, and finally to the current designation, the Food Security Commission.

## 2. Right to Food in the Mauritanian Context

Mauritania covers a vast area of more than a million square kilometers. It serves as a bridge between the Arab and African worlds. However, only 1% of its land is arable and composed of fragile agricultural and ecological areas influenced by the climate and its disturbances.

The population structure is a pyramid increasingly dominated by young people, especially in urban areas, where school enrollment rates are in a constant increase. Labor activity also saw an improvement between 2012 and 2014. The level of absolute poverty was estimated by the Permanent Survey on Household Living Conditions 2014 at 126,035 Ouguiya per capita in 2012, compared to 169,445 Ouguiya in 2014.

Most agricultural production depends on old and primitive technology, with low productivity. Access to advanced means of production and technology is rare, due to the poverty and illiteracy of most producers, frail public policy, poor food security governance, low productivity, and climatic factors, particularly drought, floods, and locust invasions.<sup>6</sup>

The strategic gamble on food security is the ability to provide material and economic ability to access sufficient, safe, healthy, and nutritious food, to all Mauritanians at any time, allowing them to meet their energy needs and suiting their preferences and tastes to enable them to lead a healthy, active,

and decent living. This is through: (a) availability of sufficient food supplies, (b) continuous and stable access to food supplies, without fluctuations or shortages, whether seasonal or annual, (c) accessible and affordable nutrition, and (d) ensuring the quality and safety of food.

### Mauritania's Situation as a Least Developed Country on the Sahel and the Impact of Food Security:

Mauritania is a Sahel-Saharan country. It is arid and vulnerable to climate impacts, threatening its food security and pushing grain prices higher due to fluctuations in agricultural production brought about by low and irregular rainfall, deteriorating climatic conditions, and desertification and sand encroachment to the limited areas of arable land. This is in addition to the impact of pests and insects, such as locusts and others.

Although the agriculture, fishing, and livestock sector employs two thirds of local labor, these activities account to only 23% of GDP, owing to weak production levels and structural deficiencies. The growth of the pastoral agricultural sector is a major contribution to economic growth, stabilizing the rural population and improving their living conditions, especially their incomes; improving food security by increasing and diversifying product supply; and contributing to reducing imports and increasing producer incomes. It is considered crucial for poverty alleviation, especially among women, and in preserving natural heritage from a sustainable development perspective that takes into account scarcity of resources. However, in the present situation, the pastoral agriculture sector does not seem able to play these different roles despite efforts by the government and its partners to invest in this sector. The country still depends imports for its food security. Productivity is poor on all levels of production; producers are unorganized; and the sector lacks the ability to redistribute.

Real estate ownership is also a main impediment to farmers being able to purchase the land they are farming. Most are wage earners, which causes frustration and ignores the principle of «land is for those who plant it.» Mauritania's capacity to increase production in agriculture, livestock, and fishing is crucial to achieving development goals on the social and economic levels.

However, the food situation remains a common

concern. Regular and seasonal food and nutrition crises are becoming more apparent. Their root causes are deep and structural, but also circumstantial. Poverty and its effects (lack of food security) is the common denominator. It drives these crises and feeds on absence of adaptability, lack of synergy between natural resources and livelihoods, severe productivity shortfalls, and poor management of natural resources, added to climate conditions.

## 3. National Context

Discussions on «food security» and the «right to food» in the Mauritanian context remains extremely limited<sup>7</sup> and does not go beyond researchers, experts, a handful of thinkers, and UN Library users. The concepts are barely mentioned in references and, if so, they are used in a general and vague manner. It appears two or three times in public policies and strategies, albeit in a timid form, namely in the National Food Security Strategy in the 2015 Horizon and 2030 Vision and its executive plan called the National Program for Agricultural Investment and Food Security 2011-2015.<sup>8</sup> It remains difficult to extrapolate the features of these two concepts on the ground, whether in related legislation and public policy-making or the restructuring of government and administrative bodies charged with their implementation.

In a global context, characterized by the steady rise of food prices for the past 20 years (with a significant and unreasonable increase in 2007-2008 and 2011-2012), the already heavy food import bill for the poorest countries increased by more than 20%.<sup>9</sup> Food insecurity became a reality threatening millions around the world and a growing danger, creating a nightmare for other countries,<sup>10</sup> especially those already suffering from chronic food deficit such as Mauritania.

Mauritania is a Sahel country constantly suffering

7 Ibid.

8 Stratégie Nationale de Sécurité Alimentaire pour la Mauritanie aux horizons 2015 et vision 2030, Plan National de Développement Agricole (PNDA) 2025.

9 United Nations, «Global food import bill rising despite robust output in 2017 – UN,» 9 November 2017.

10 FAO, «AFRICA: Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition - The Food Security and Nutrition-Conflict Nexus: Building resilience for food security, nutrition and peace,» Accra, 2017.

from food insecurity and is one of the most fragile Arab countries in terms of food security, despite its important and diverse economic capacities. However, with a structural deficit of more than 70% of its food needs,<sup>11</sup> Mauritania faces recurrent food insecurity crises linked to objective circumstances, such as poor food security governance (which is linked to political will) and low production, or climatic conditions, such as drought, floods, and locusts. The various security vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the high rise in the prices of basic foodstuffs, reaching more than 50% in the local market.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, according to official estimates, more than half a million people live in a state of extreme poverty and food insecurity. The number is expected to rise to around 1 million<sup>13</sup> due to the fragile living conditions of rural populations and the high production deficit or natural disasters increasingly affecting semi-urban populations. This shows the extent to which food security is a priority in Mauritania.

Although arable land makes up merely 1% of the total area of the country, it covers around 1 million hectares of land for farming, particularly in the areas adjacent to Senegal River. Unfortunately, they are not exploited seriously for agriculture.

At the dawn of independence in the early 1960s, most Mauritanians lived in the countryside and the desert. Their food production and distribution system was based on traditional social hierarchy. Farming and herding were considered hard work and given to the lower and marginalized social segments, such as slaves, women, and some sheikhs. Following that period, the population gradually shifted to urban centers, as consecutive drought led to the deterioration of their natural environment, where they used to live in harmony with ecological systems. This caused an environmental imbalance, as the majority of the population (60%) currently lives in cities.

This had a profound impact on the social and economic life of the population that supports the production systems, especially due to climate events with devastating effects, such as severe rainfall shortages and locust invasions. Nevertheless, a mapping of vulnerable groups, segments, and areas was produced, which clearly indicates the most

11 «National Alimentary Context,» Food Security Commission (CSA), <http://www.csa.gov.mr/spip.php?article47>.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

affected and vulnerable areas in terms of food security in the country. They are the southeast, the riverbank, and pastoral regions.

Historically, the Mauritanian government established the National Import and Export Company (SONIMEX) in early 1966, shortly following independence. Fifty one percent of its capital was owned by the Mauritanian state and it was granted monopoly rights to importing and distributing basic foodstuffs.<sup>14</sup> Since dissolving the monopoly and freeing foreign trade in 1996, the company gradually transformed into a market regulation body, controlling flow and prices. It supported economic and social development by providing basic food products to low-income citizens at reasonable prices throughout the country. However, the company was finally dissolved by its General Assembly on 31 January 2018 and a group of expert accountants were assigned to the tasks.

The Mauritanian government, which had clearly declared its intentions to liquidate the company, decided to transfer its functions to the Food Security Commission. However, the decision caused public controversy, as it came after the courts opened cases of corruption in the company. Its dissolution, perhaps, is an attempt to completely bury the issue.

#### 4. Historical Overview of the Food Security Institutional Path

By the early 1970s, the country had been hit by a severe drought, causing a severe shock to the lives of the population. It shook their subsistence patterns and diet, which had traditionally depended on rainfed agriculture and irrigation in the oases. The government tackled the problem by providing minimum food security, taking a number of steps, including the establishment of some specialized institutions under different names:

- **Emergency Operation Plan, 1973-1978;**
- **Mauritanian Grain Office, 1975;**
- **Office of the Food Aid Commission, 1979 to 1982;**
- **Office of the Food Security Commission, 1982 to 2007;**
- **Office of the Social Protection and Food Security Commission, 2007-2008;**
- **Food Security Commission, since 2008.**

The current Food Security Commission,<sup>15</sup> estab-

lished in 1982 by merging the Mauritanian Grain Office and Food Aid Commission, is a public institution with administrative and financial independence, under the supervision of the Prime Minister, according to Decree 192-2008 issued on 19 October 2018.

Successive governments tended to make some hasty decisions under popular political pressure or and ensuing situation, such as dividing the Ministry of Rural Development into two ministries, one for agriculture and the other for animal development or increasing the number of food supply shops at subsidized prices or dissolving SONIMEX, which had supplied the necessary food to the country and sold it at subsidized prices, in order to maintain price stability and avoid market speculation.

The shift from relying on local crops, mainly a variety of maize, legumes, and animal products, to total dependence on imported goods, especially wheat, is a real challenge, making people dependent on nutrition from abroad. It also led to the adoption of completely new diets. The majority of the population is dependent on rice and wheat, both imported, and it is obvious that they are alien to society and its dietary habits, leading them to complete dependence on foreign aid, market fluctuations, the mercy of the sea, and lack and unaffordability of raw material.

The economy of the Mauritanian food system has fragile foundations. It depends primarily on rain, whether for livestock or various types of farming, flood, irrigated, rainfed, and oasis-based and their productivity. It is also governed by local culture, which sees it as an inferior and unworthy endeavor. Fishing, on the other hand, feeds a good number of people on the northern coasts (Atlantic Ocean and Senegal River). However, the system favors large landowners, merchants, farmers, and feudal lords, at the expense of the consumers, who pay double for the products, which could be expired or failing to meet health standards.<sup>16</sup>

In May 2012, the Mauritanian government developed a resource called the National Strategy on Food Security (SNSA), focusing on providing a comprehensive vision of food security in Mauritania. It is considered the main resource on the question for most interveners in the period between 2015 and 2030 and will be reviewed every 4 years. An execu-

tive plan was also developed, the National Program for Agricultural Development and Food Security 2011-2015, to address the various challenges of providing a minimum of food security as a technical term defined by the literature of concerned international organizations.

In terms of food security and the right to food, the investment program, consisting of 112 projects at a cost of 350 billion Ouguiya (\$1=360), was based on ten points covering 4 pillars: (1) land and water management through and environmental protection and monitoring program; (2) combating desertification; (3) market access through a program to improve marketing and trade infrastructure; and (4) food supplies through homogeneous programs, such as:

- **Agricultural Development Program,**
- **Livestock Development Program,**
- **Fisheries Development Program,**
- **Program to strengthen early warning systems and food crisis management;**
- **Program to improve access to food and drinking water;**
- **Program to support financing systems and create income-generating activities;**
- **Regional project to support grazing in the coast;**
- **Food Security Project funded by the Islamic Development Bank;**
- **Agricultural Research Development Center, through a program to strengthen research, training, extension, and advisory support, and a program to support local development and good governance.**

This investment program aimed at a qualitative improvement of the agricultural sector, by creating a new generation of programs whose main objective is expanding agricultural production to cover 50% of the country's needs of grains. The investment program covered all rural sub-sectors, such as agriculture, livestock, sea fisheries, environment, and related social activities (water supply, training, and others).

However, seven years into the strategy and its executive plan, the New National Development Strategy 2015-2030, known as the Accelerated Growth and Shared Prosperity Plan (SCAPP) is below expectations, especially in terms of reducing the impact of poverty and lowering rural poverty rates, to reducing food security and vulnerability from 35% to 20%

and then 10% in 2030.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the country still faces a 60% structural deficit of grain needs, which needs to be covered either through imports or international aid. The household food security survey conducted by the Food Security Observatory (OSA) and WFP in January 2013 indicated a high national average, with 16.5% of households suffering from food insecurity (a little more than 560,000 people, including 340,000 in rural areas).

During preparations for the National Strategy on Food Security (SNSA) in Horizon 2015 and Vision 2030 and the National Program for Agricultural Investment and Food Security 2011-2015 (PNIA), the government was eager to involve a wide range of CSOs in discussions. However, it was later apparent it was due to pressure from western partners and donors. Soon the government steered away from CSOs in the implementation and evaluation phase. The last meeting of the evaluation committee was held in 2017, without serious civil society participation or media coverage despite the importance and sensitivity of the meeting's goals.<sup>18</sup>

The absence of monitoring and follow-up mechanisms is another factor, preventing the availability of important data on the state's regular interventions. Several objective and realistic proposals were presented to solve the question, some national, others local and regional. However, they were not put forward and there is no existing radical solution to the issue. On the other hand, the state and its partners, deliberately or not, excluded civil society, without which there will be no sustainable food security.

#### 5. Food Security in Mauritania

Mauritania has been suffering from a structural deficit since the great drought of 1972 and 1973. About 75% of the total area is desert, with a cumulative rainfall of 100 mm annually. In the rest of the country, rainfall averages between 100 and 400 mm annually. These fragile, difficult, and unstable climatic and environmental conditions have aggravated poverty in a country known for chronic and recurrent food crises.

Cereal crops, dominated by traditional production systems associated with irregular rainfall, are characterized by low and weak productivity. In fertile years, cereal production accounts for only 40% of estimated needs. The gross net shortfall was esti-

14 Sheikh Mohamad Horma, "Decision to dissolve SONIMEX," Sahara Media, 1 February 2018.

15 Mission Statement, Food Security Commission (CSA), <http://www.csa.gov.mr/spip.php?article63>.

16 Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS Net), "Mauritania, Perspectives on Food Security, February to September 2017."

17 Ibid.

18 Follow-up Workshop on the National Food Security Strategy, 24 July 2018.

mated at 417,000 tons in 2001 and 2002. Currently, the coverage of food needs is 69% of rice and 35% of other cereals.<sup>19</sup> The annual volume of grain imports is 280,000 tons.<sup>20</sup> Information about livestock and its contribution to national food security is not documented and cannot be analyzed, despite being dominant on many levels and according to many circles. The Food Security Commission's budget in the draft fiscal law for 2019 is around 200 million Ouguiya, with 128 million Ouguiya going to management and 68 million for investment.<sup>21</sup>

However, the problem with that government body, charged with preventing and managing food crises, is that it has not yet considered restructuring to meet the new requirements and changes. Although some civil society groups have been making this suggestion since 2012, during the discussion and approval of the National Food Security Strategy. Clearly, being limited to coordinating international food aid provided by Mauritania's development partners does not provide the Commission with the ambition or authority to achieve the goals intended by the concepts of the right to food and food security, whether rhetorically or on the ground. It also faces major problems related to bureaucracy and lack of transparency, as well as the political exploitation of food aid by the government, especially during election campaigns.

## 6. From Food Shortages to Environmental Degradation

The strategic gamble on food security is the ability to provide material and economic ability to all Mauritians at any time to access sufficient, safe, healthy, and nutritious food, allowing them to meet their energy needs and suiting their preferences and tastes to enable them to lead a healthy, active, and decent living. This can only occur through adequate, sufficient, and stable food supply and availability, without fluctuations or shortages, whether seasonal or annual, at reasonable prices and, finally, ensuring food quality and safety. Unsustainable production practices shifted the problem from food shortages to environmental degradation, which in turn further undermines food security and exacerbates health problems. Existing food insecurity is a result of these various im-

19 Department of Planning, Studies, Follow-up, and Evaluation, Ministry of Rural Development.

20 Ibid.

21 Food Security Commission, Presentation of Budget to the Parliament, 21 November 2018.

balances and a natural consequence of the growing poverty that places the population in a vicious cycle, especially in rural areas where the poverty rate reached 59% in 2005.

Despite the remarkable increase in national cereal production, from 80,000 tons for the low production years in 2002-2003 (16% of the requirements) to 150 thousand tons in 2008-2009, which covered 30% of the need. Investments in this sector, despite their size and priority, do not allow for the division of this production in a way that reduces the deficit and ensures food self-sufficiency. Over the past decade Mauritania has produced only about 30% of its overall grain needs.<sup>22</sup>

The 2014 bi-annual national food survey (based on the SMART methodology) conducted by the Ministry of Health and UNICEF following the harvest season (November-December) showed that the poorest and most vulnerable are children under 5 and that preempting food crises remains difficult.<sup>23</sup> Food expenditure declined from 57.8% in 2008 to 47.9% in 2014 due to the global crisis, diminishing public resources, and the end of most bilateral food security cooperation programs. This encouraged increasing expenditures on education and health, by 5.4% and 4.8% respectively in 2014, compared to 1% and 3.8% in 2008. This had a negative impact on eradicating poverty, which became more pronounced in rural areas than in urban areas. The impact of poverty and food insecurity in the different provinces could be categorized into four main groups, the poorest being Guidimaka and Assaba, the Brakna and Tagant (22.8%) containing almost half of the poor and extremely poor. Food demand remains largely unsatisfied by domestic production, with the country importing at least 70% of its annual food needs, including more than 300,000 tons of grain. For this reason, food security specialists consider the country to be suffering from a structural shortage of grains.

Added to the weak coverage of food needs through local production and insufficient and unstable income, supply is also complicated by the size of the country, spanning over 1 million square kilometers; unregulated settlement, which happens without state planning or programs; and isolation. Living conditions in remote areas are especially

22 Actualitix, Mauritanie : Production de céréales (tonnes)- 2016.

23 Rapport Agir Plan d'action résilience au Sahel 2016.

harsh. Rural populations there face periods of scarcity that exacerbate malnutrition and sometimes lead to famine. There is also a high incidence of infectious diseases like malaria, acute respiratory infections, intestinal parasites, and diarrhea and/or endemic diseases, such as hemorrhagic fevers. This bitter reality that weakens the nutritional and dietary situation in these areas, reducing the population's capacity to produce and increase its income, on the one hand, and raising health costs on the other.

In this context, the most recent household survey on the food situation conducted by CIDA and WFP in 2015 showed that 23.8% of Mauritanian households are exposed to severe food insecurity. However, food insecurity increased significantly in some internal regions (31.4%), but the southern and eastern regions feel the brunt of the impact, namely Hodh Ech Chargui (37.1%), Gorgol (35.1%), and Guidimaka (33.1%). The situation in Nouakchott remains stable, where 17% of households suffer from food insecurity.<sup>24</sup>

Significant differences exist between various Mauritanian regions. For example, Guidimaka, Tagant, and Hodh Ech Chargui suffer from acute malnutrition and underweight, while Trarza, Nouadhibou, and Nouakchott have low rates. Although food insecurity tends to spread in urban and peri-urban areas, it is gaining momentum in rural areas, where food insecurity is closely linked to poverty and impacts low- or under-income households, which have no access to basic foodstuffs and necessities. What is unusual is that most households suffering from food insecurity live in the pastoral agricultural region, the rain zone, and the Senegal River valley, where water and floods provide good opportunity for farming and food production. However, this blatant contradiction is a result of poor rural governance, planning, and ability to predict, in addition to rampant corruption in related public institutions and other substantive obstacles.

Low rainfall<sup>25</sup> between 2013 and 2017 had its consequences on agricultural production and livestock and is one of the key causes of increasing food secu-

24 Ibid.

25 "Prévenir les effets du changement climatique," Alliance Mondiale contre le Changement Climatique Mauritanie : Enclencher un processus de résilience en matière de sécurité alimentaire», 2016.

ity around the country. Households whose harvest failed tried to sell their small ruminants to obtain food. This resulted in a relatively large increase in livestock supply in markets around the country, in turn, leading to lower livestock prices and reducing these households' purchasing power and savings. Some rural households were forced to reduce their consumption of cereals, oil, and sugar, weakening their food security situation and putting children's nutritional status at risk.

Markets are regularly supplied with sufficient and diverse quantities of food (wheat, rice, sugar, flour, oil, milk, and others) and traditional commerce involving products from Mali, Senegal, and Morocco (dates, corn, raisins, maize, peanuts, and so on) has been growing. However, the majority of poor Mauritanian households, especially in the fragile pastoral areas in the southern, eastern, and [Senegal River] bank regions and their urban centers, are dealing with the chronic situation by rearranging their priorities. Their situation is likely to become urgent, especially for the poorest.

In most rural areas, seasonal incomes of vulnerable households registered a drop, compared to average regular years. It was a result of the lack or poverty of income from agricultural work, the absence of earnings, the constant decline in migrant remittances, and the continuous deterioration of livestock prices resulting from the poor status of pastoral areas.

In fact, the deterioration of pastures and the excessive supply of livestock in the markets have all contributed to the decline in prices of livestock. There is widespread and growing concern in pastoral and agricultural areas due to the poor rainfed agricultural output last year and the sharp decline in livestock prices, a mainstay for the population. In fact, the deterioration of pastures and the oversupply of livestock in the market contributed to the decline in prices.

Taking into account the frequency of climate-related crises, the government joined the African Risk Capacity (ARC) agency. However, low rainfall in the past two years compelled the government to spend more than 10 million US Dollars to cover basic food needs for 250 thousand people in the agricultural areas most vulnerable to drought.

Overall, more than 46% of Mauritania's population has been directly or indirectly affected by food insecurity<sup>26</sup> (the inability to secure basic food needs throughout the year). This situation is exacerbated by poverty and lack of public or private investment

26 Food Security Commission, National Food Overview, op. cit.

in social and productive sectors, especially farming and food industries.

The last major wave of food insecurity took place 10 years ago, in 2008. More than 5% of the population experiencing severe food insecurity and the overall acute malnutrition rate exceeded 15% in some parts of the country. The most vulnerable groups were women and young children (25% of children under age five were underweight, 30% stunted), unemployed youth, small producers, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.<sup>27</sup>

A 2015 study by FAO and the Mauritanian government on the prevalence of food insecurity, based on the Food Security Monitoring System methodology, concluded that around 30% of households face food insecurity. Around half of the households did not have access to drinking water and suffer from diarrheal diseases, malaria, and acute respiratory infections, causing the loss of life of many children and women.

Soaring prices of imported food purchased by hard currency, rising energy (gas and electricity) prices, and falling incomes or their absence in some cases, especially in rural areas, due to drought and livestock death between 2015 and 2017 augmented the structural weaknesses in food security.<sup>28</sup> As a result, basic food prices rose by more than 50% in 2017. Households already unable to meet their food needs adopted high-risk coping strategies, such as reducing food rations, lowering the standards of consumed food, and sometimes eliminating some meals.

According to some predictions, the number of people affected by food insecurity in 2019 could be three times that of the previous year (250 thousand in January 2018), due to delayed rainfall, the limited or below average agricultural yields, in addition to the lack of pastures, reducing livestock profitability. This figure is also higher than the five-year average of 580,000 and is close to the average of the years 2005-2010, estimated at 700,000. Emergency assistance needs in 2019 will peak between April and August.

The poor, who allocate more than 80% of household income to food, had to reduce health and education expenditures, and sell their simple as-

<sup>27</sup> Enfance, sécurité alimentaire et nutrition, Rapport d'évaluation finale du Programme conjoint F-OMD FAO/PAM/UNICEF/OMS - 2013

<sup>28</sup> Profil sécurité alimentaire Mauritanie, - CSAO-CILSS, Avril 2018.

sets (tiny holdings and some domestic animals). The consumption of meat, vegetables, and dairy dropped and dependency on imported grains grew. For example, hunger and malnutrition, particularly «hidden hunger» associated with poor diets, continue to be a serious concern in the country. Although the proportion of underweight children under 5 dropped from 47% in 1990 to 24% in 2006, the situation was suddenly reversed in 2007, with a 30% increase.

The uneven seasonal and geographical distribution of rainfall severely impacted crop growth since 2011-2013, when rainfall was well below 50% of the average. This also meant that pastures were not replenished, except in rare cases. In more recent years (2015-2017), herd migration to Mali and Senegal, which usually starts in December for nomads and March for semi-settled breeders, began early in the south and the east.

The level of the Senegal River remained relatively low (3 meters below seasonal level) and the short high water period led to a significant reduction in the walu crop. The risk of locust infestation is low and no abnormal epidemics have been witnessed since last July. However, poor households, which make up around 60% of the population of rainfed and agricultural areas were the hardest hit.<sup>29</sup>

## 7. Addressing the Challenges

The approach presented here includes several essential pillars to ensure food security, stemming from national specificities - related to productivity, specialization, crops, food habits, infrastructure, natural and industrial working conditions, and vulnerability - to ensure a decent living for citizens. It revolves around several priorities, such as:

- **Develop macroeconomic strategies and policies, through updating the national food security strategy and the rural sector strategy (agriculture and livestock), setting achievable and observable targets, ensuring access to basic nutrition services, and establishing social protection nets;**
- **Finance projects to combat hunger and malnutrition, through strengthening food security stocks and its decentralization, in addition to school sponsorships;**
- **Develop and build food and grain warehouses and establish security reserves;**
- **Combat poverty and want, open cash and**

<sup>29</sup> Declaration by the Food Security NGO Network ROSA, [http://cridem.org/C\\_Info.php?article=703808](http://cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=703808).

**food transfers, and protect and integrate women and children, through support to women who are heads of households, impoverished, or divorced;**

- **Strengthen nutrition and maintain the health of poor and vulnerable households, through improving health coverage.**

The sustainable improvement of agricultural and food productivity and poor household incomes and ensuring their access to food is an indispensable element. This can only be achieved through the development and rehabilitation of the water infrastructure, the diversification of agricultural production in rural farms and oasis crops, and the increase in the added value of livestock production through the development of animal breeding networks, training of rural and peri-urban dwellers, and promoting the exploitation of fish products. One of the obstacles contributing to food insecurity is the permanent export of livestock and fish to neighboring countries and their use for trade instead of domestic market needs, which has a negative impact on food security.

In any case, to ensure food security, it is essential to analyze and promote Mauritanian nutritional habits and practices and examine traditional methods, that may or may not be currently used, to contribute to food security. Examples of Mauritanian food heritage include dairy drying and preservation, grain saving, drying of meat and fish, cheese making, and preserving fats well before the advent of refrigerators and current conservation tools, even in remote places with no electricity and scarce water.

This multidimensional approach involves all types of actors, such as central ministries, civil society, the private sector and traders, and so on.

Although tackling food insecurity is a high priority for all local, regional, and national actors, it is yet to lead to concerted efforts and coordinated steps between actors in Mauritania. The rise of global food shortages, migration, and civil wars around the world, in addition to climate change, is detrimental to the urgent need for food security and affects the poorest and most vulnerable households on the global level, as well being a great risk to the lives of the population and the stability of the country in Mauritania.

Food security in Mauritania should be seen through the lens of its geography as an Arab-African country, incorporating similarities with the countries of the Sahel and Sahara as well as Arab countries. It

should be addressed through two geographically and economically different production patterns and even on the level of food habits and practices. Such a situation calls for the design and implementation of integrated food and nutritional security programs, including interventions aimed at the key structural causes defined above. Therefore, with the assistance of its development partners and in coordination and effective involvement of CSOs, the Mauritanian Government must develop new mechanisms for the design, planning, implementation, follow-up, and evaluation of food security management public policies, which require increased support and better coordination and evaluation to improve the effectiveness of services to prevent and treat malnutrition.

Coverage, targeting and design of food security interventions must be significantly improved, allowing them to contribute to reversing the rising trends in malnutrition, hunger, and poverty in Mauritania. A comprehensive response to the food crisis should include the systematic integration of sectoral interventions in food aid, health, agriculture, education, and social affairs at the national and local levels. To remain coherent and sustainable, this response should articulate local and global policies and actions and ensure synergies to protect and strengthen food security, using an integrated approach to the National Food Security Strategy (SNSA) and the National Food Security and Food Investment Plan (PNIA).

Another factor directly contributing to food security is the state's treatment of the private sector and relinquishing some of its powers. Some crucial institutions have been dissolved and their powers given to the private sector to play the exact same role (supplying, marketing, importing, and storing products) of companies like SONIMEX and others, influencing food security and safety. Most food security transactions (agriculture, livestock, and fish) do not ensure food security. They are untransparent and may not be subject to food safety standards (purchase of third or fourth degree or even expired products, including rice, dairy, oils, and others).

Furthermore, policies related to land ownership do not help in achieving food security and may sometimes hinder the process. Owners of arable land are not exploiting their holdings, which are sometimes leased to those who do, widening the gap and contributing to food insecurity in water-rich and arable areas. Lack of specific programs to encourage and promote agriculture, especially family farming,

such as training, orientation, funding, mentoring, and support, also contributed to limiting the impact of agricultural policies.

However, despite the critical economic situation, the Mauritanian government is being supported by FAO and WFP to continue the implementation of SNSA and PNIA, albeit at a much slower pace than was expected in 2012. This could be the minimum that reflects political obligations at the highest level and civil society's commitment to reduce food insecurity and address obstacles to the SNSA and the SDGs, which the government aims to achieve.

Taking into account the multidimensional nature of food security, a priority action plan and a new investment program for the 2015-2030 period must be developed. It should be ambitious and must learn from past mistakes,<sup>30</sup> aiming to revitalize food production and to address the different dimensions of food security:

- **Availability of food products in sufficient quantities.**
- **Universal access, including the most vulnerable and low-income groups.**
- **In order to promote a balanced and healthy diet for all, utilize food products and ensure their quality and safety.**
- **Supply stability, involving a political dimension and mechanisms for prevention/management of crises and natural disasters.**

In 2008, Mauritania was chosen to pilot the REACH initiative endorsed by FAO, WHO, UNICEF, and WFP. A REACH facilitator was appointed to work with partners (the government, UN agencies, NGOs, and other civil society organizations) to develop a common strategy to combat hunger and undernutrition in children.

The initiative created a multisectoral team composed of key stakeholders: the Government, UN agencies, national and international NGOs, and other CSOs working on the issue. It developed a nutrition action plan to demonstrate how to improve and expand a series of food security and nutrition interventions that will have a major impact on enabling the country to resume its progress towards achieving the MDGs, namely halving the proportion of undernourished children. Moreover, this work helped improve coordination between stakeholders and team members to identify overlap or non-intervention areas while drawing on each other's experiences. The action plan was based on

30 Al-Jazeera, "Around 1 Million Mauritians Suffer from Food Insecurity in Mauritania," 19 May 2015.

the National Nutrition Strategy and adopted by the National Committee for the Promotion of Nutrition. People have different perceptions of food insecurity, but it appears to be a key priority for all local actors who have developed survival strategies during difficult periods or in the aftermath of natural disasters. In general, women seem to be the main victims of this situation. However, they are also key actors in the fight against food insecurity, as producers and heads of households. As such, food and nutrition security policies must include these activities and must be shared by women.<sup>31</sup>

The right to food and achieving food sovereignty pose several questions that entail the accountability and comprehensive review of various basic and secondary factors, such as access to means of production, land tenure and property holdings, as well as organizing the agricultural workforce, the credit system and agricultural loans, and how products reach markets due to remoteness and the high cost of transportation.

Food security is based mainly on reducing dependence on imports by encouraging investment in technological development to ensure sustainability of food production. Priority given to the development of agricultural technology, scientific resources, good governance, and regional, international, and inter-regional cooperation, which all play an important role in providing food security and are decisive in addressing security problems. The approach should also create links between women, the environment, and local and regional food sectors.<sup>32</sup>

The weight of traditions and food consumption habits, savings and school guarantees, and FAO SAVE FOOD food security stocks for villages have an additional influence on household diet and that of society as a whole.<sup>33</sup> To deal with the price increase, the Mauritanian government, WFP, and CIDA had implemented a program targeting vul-

31 FAO/WFP, "Sécurité Alimentaire et Implications Humanitaires en Afrique de l'Ouest et au Sahel," October 2017.

32 Mohamed Said al-Saadi, "Regional Report on Agenda 2030 Implementation in the Arab Region," ANND, 2018, p. 5.

33 "Mauritania Food Security Monitoring Survey," WFP, 2015, <https://www.wfp.org/content/food-security-monitoring-surveys>.

nerable groups, covering 300,000 people, including school meals for 200,000 schoolchildren and food for work for more than 100,000 beneficiaries to improve their livelihoods.

Another initiative was Solidarity Stores with moderate prices to provide basic foodstuff at a 30% to 50% subsidy for a range of products (oil, rice, wheat, and sugar). More than 600 points of sale were opened around the country. However, the number of these popular stores fell drastically, due to corruption and weakness of supply mechanisms.

The Expanded Intervention Program and the Stimulus Program were the first programs to introduce food warehousing in villages. These stores were mainly aimed at compensating for losses resulting from sales prices. The project was jointly designed and implemented with the WFP between 2005 and 2007, with the following objectives: (a) reducing the vulnerability of populations affected by food insecurity and (b) improving the capacity to respond to future food crises. It was complemented by the 2011 Solidarity Program, which aimed to supply basic food commodities at affordable prices for vulnerable segments; the free distribution of basic foodstuff to the poorest and most vulnerable segments; and the creation of work opportunities for unemployed graduates.

It was later expanded through the Amal Program, which is still running and aims to combat poverty and malnutrition, through preservation of livestock, ensuring the availability of basic products for the most needy population, and creating job opportunities for unemployed young graduates. The cost of the program was estimated at about 45 billion Mauritanian Ouguiya, of which 23 billion were included in the preliminary budget proposal. The program was scheduled to begin in early January 2012 and end on 31 August 2012. The Food Security Commission was mandated to implement the program in the internal regions and SONIMEX in Nouakchott. The selection of Commission was due to its experience in managing and developing major and expedient interventions and its considerable experience in similar complex operations. SONIMEX had been originally established by the government for two main reasons: (a) avoiding the monopoly of the small number of importers and (b) to have a strategic role as the national market regulator and supplier of basic commodities.

Each year, the government covers these stores by 12 to 15 million Dollars. However, in addition to

problems related to free distribution and limited daily rations, the subsidized sales strategy will not necessarily allow households to access food products. The most vulnerable beneficiaries lack the income, even at low prices. In the past two years, these shops witnessed a dramatic decline and lost much of their effectiveness and credibility, due to changes in management, their administrative status and dependency, and the dissolution of SONIMEX. The impact of this change is yet to be witnessed. Programs developed by the government and other partners are expected to solve the problem of access to food, some of which still exist. The main challenge is providing targeted and coordinated support on the short and medium terms.

## 8. Agricultural Policy and Food Security in Mauritania

In the last decade, the state adopted more effective policies for agricultural sector development through better investment of available agricultural resources in order to increase production and productivity, stimulate minimum self-sufficiency, and provide tools and means to facilitate the implementation of these plans and programs, through the

National Reference Strategy for Accelerated Growth and Shared Welfare and the SDGs. Special importance was given to the agricultural sector, especially in areas with important agricultural resources and water. This process focused on developing and enacting legislation and laws, monitoring the necessary financial resources for agricultural investment, attracting investors and directing them towards agricultural production and exploitation, keeping pace with agricultural services, and mechanization of the agricultural sector.

Misuse of resources and lack of responsibility in production have led to the expansion of poverty, the decline of arable areas, the high rate of desertification, and the loss of the enormous soil advantages and fertility. Effectively addressing agricultural imbalances requires that the agricultural sector be given high priority in the structure of the national economy through increasing its financial resources.

Also in the past decade, the government restructured agricultural loans and wiped out most of the debt as a gesture to encourage farmers. The CSA encouraged public institutions to develop activities or boost profitability. Priorities have been identified in this area in cooperation with government actors. To allow more flexibility in financing the rural sector, the Deposits and Development Fund created a branch responsible for the Commission's activities in financing the agricultural sector. The following specific measures were undertaken:

- **Issuing Decree No.219 on 29/5/2015 to establish a branch of the Deposits and Development Fund under the title of the Mauritanian Agricultural Loan. It was established in the form of a hidden company and entered the Commercial Register under No.2531 and the Analytical Record under No.87\281\GU\8290.**
- **Facilitating the availability of 2 billion in cash for the Mauritanian Fish Marketing Company, to enable it to meet its basic needs for marketing traditional fishing products and support it in negotiations regarding the sale of fishing products.**
- **Providing a financial cover of 792 million to the now defunct SONIMEX, before liquidation, to establish a rice-husking factory.**
- **Establishing coffee bean factories in Boghe and Néma cities at a cost of more than 9 million Euros.**
- **Mauritanian Agricultural Loan.**
- **Dependency of rural sector financing.**
- **Financing the Mauritania Date Company, launched in February 2019.**

In the context of the Autumn 2015 Agricultural Plan, the Mauritanian Agricultural Loan received 77 applications: Rosso for 1293 hectares, Boghe for 1293 hectares, and Kaédi for 1165 ha.

As part of the efforts by public authorities to promote and develop the agricultural sector in general and irrigated agriculture in particular, CSA mobilized 7,455,758,580 Ouguiya to finance the marketing needs of the Autumn 2014 Campaign crops. This amount needs to be recovered from two sources, the National Revenue and Export Company, which pays revenue from rice sales, and the Ministry of Finance, which subsidizes this operation.<sup>34</sup> The Deposits and Development fund tried to show the importance of making payments related to agricultural sector financing, which includes mechanization funds (3.3 billion) and loan granted to the Revenue and Export Company mentioned above.

### Family Farming as a Basis for Food Sovereignty:

Family and household farms, in the broad sense, account for more than 80% of agricultural activity in oases, in the plains, and in valleys. They provide the bulk of agricultural production in the country, as indicated by the final results of the survey on households and agricultural exploiters in 2016, which showed a 13% increase compared to the average of the last quintile. In terms of national production of cereal, the rice yield was 65.85%, followed by 27.88% for corn, and 6.7% for others such as sorghum, maize, and wheat.

It also acts as a complementary source of income for farmers, with an important contribution to the local and national economy, reducing imports and employing thousands of people (farmers, suppliers, wholesalers, retailers, carriers, service providers, workers, etc.). In this context, improving the practice and development of family farms seems an unavoidable aspect of contributing to the country's sustainable economic and social development. Family and household agriculture can act as a lever for food sovereignty, a concept not currently in place in Mauritania, by seeking to develop public policies in the field, based on:

Prioritizing the strengthening of household and family farming;  
Granting access to land to both men and women;  
Protecting the country from cheap but unhealthy food imports.

<sup>34</sup> Deposits and Development Fund Report 2015-2016.

## 9. Projections for 2018-2020

In the next few years (2018-2020), food insecurity will depend largely on the following assumptions:<sup>35</sup>

- **The price of cereals will rise by an average of 25% during July and August for several reasons. Mauritania imports most of its needs and prices are subject to global market fluctuations and requirements. On the national level, traders reaped benefits from changing the old currency, causing an increase of most prices. Other factors include the monopoly imposed by importers to keep prices and profits high. Moreover, the national trade system is unable to compete or integrate in a competitive system characterized by opportunism and quick profit and which is not organized based on supply and demand. Rather, most food and other products are imported through monopolies, allowing the control of the market and adding to the vulnerability of poor consumers, thus preventing them from ensuring food security.**
- **Feed prices will peak in July/August 2019, and are likely to be 30.6% higher in the same period last year.**
- **Support programs, such as Amal Solidarity or the Ramadan Operation, will continue, but without any tangible improvement in its mechanisms.**
- **The prevalence of acute malnutrition will be higher than basic levels in agricultural pastoral and rainfed areas. Thus, the need for emergency assistance will reach a peak between April and August 2019.**
- **The time period for poor households to ensure their food status increased due to good rainfall during the 2018 season**
- **The Government and WFP will conduct targeted, limited, and free-of-charge distributions in March-July, which is expected to be bigger than 2017 and 2018, but insufficient and too late to meet all food needs until September 2020.**
- **Limited in-kind food aid will be provided, particularly from Japan, Saudi Arabia, and maybe Canada, giving the government the opportunity to use the media to promote**

<sup>35</sup> Perspectives sur la sécurité alimentaire, Les défis de protection de moyens d'existence élevé les niveaux de l'insécurité alimentaire, Février 2018.

such assistance, but it will not reach the beneficiaries.

## 10. Civil Society Dynamics

The huge food deficit of around 70% poses a challenge to all actors in Mauritania, including CSOs involved a real dynamic to redefine their role and mission to respond to people's aspirations. This structural deficit is a real concern for authorities that must initiate rapid consultation to involve CSOs in the assessment and follow-up of implementation of the new National Food Security Strategy (SNSA) and its investment plan. This approach would allow all stakeholders to participate in decision-making and assume joint responsibility to support a very sensitive issue like food security in the country, in a participatory and effective manner.

The government must also redirect its investments and obtain more grants from donors to address food insecurity, especially since the current targeting does not include all insecure regions. Accordingly, several CSO networks,<sup>36</sup> opinion leaders, and agricultural producers unions joined umbrellas to advocate on the right to food, such as the Alliance Against Hunger in Mauritania. These networks led to increased awareness of the issue, which had perplexed civil society and awakened social consciousness of this major social problem.

This orientation represents a greater commitment to national civil society participation in the real developmental problems in the country, in consultation with the government of Mauritania, FAO, IFAD, WFP, Biodiversity International, and other partners concerned with food security in the country. Based on this new mandate to combat hunger, his alliance will bring more hope and help achieve this noble and decisive goal for national and global stability. CSOs in Mauritania believe that there are some factors that promote food insecurity and the prevalence of persistent malnutrition and extreme poverty. They are mainly:

- **Inadequate institutional, regulatory and legal environment;**
- **Property ownership problem;**
- **Lack of organization and structuring of productive sectors;**
- **Weak agricultural productivity and reluctance of small producers;**
- **Lack of soft microfinance;**

<sup>36</sup> Joint CSO Declaration, Nouakchott, 29 February 2017, [https://grdr.org/IMG/pdf/Declaration\\_commune\\_de\\_la\\_societe\\_civile\\_3\\_.pdf](https://grdr.org/IMG/pdf/Declaration_commune_de_la_societe_civile_3_.pdf).

- **Conflicting and duplicate authorities;**
- **Lack of assessment of national resources;**
- **The acute shortfall, rather the complete absence of early warning and preparedness systems to manage food and nutrition crises;**
- **Lack of capacity to take care of vulnerable, poor, and disadvantaged people during crises;**
- **Absence of the concept of nutritional adjustment in official, local, and community cultures;**
- **Vulnerability associated with climate change and improved food supply;**
- **The need to integrate a gender dimension into food and nutrition security strategies and policies;**
- **The need to create coordination mechanisms between the different actors;**
- **Poor quality of education and nutrition habits;**
- **Poor dietary and nutritional behavior;**
- **Injustice and inequality;**
- **The weak purchasing power of the population and its absence in some cases;**
- **Absence of employment;**
- **Absence of specialized independent structures to complement the State's efforts to combat hunger;**
- **Lack of independent and participatory national dialogue and decision-making platform involving different stakeholders.**

Taking the above into consideration, stakeholders, including national NGOs, are exploring better ways to fund the activities of the National Agricultural Investment Program (NAIP) as part of the Strategic Framework for Combating Poverty, the Business Meeting, and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and other innovative initiatives. Consequently, new ways of enhancing access to food for vulnerable households, particularly «cash and voucher» programs, are being explored to ensure better nutrition for Mauritanian families while strengthening national markets.

This rationale reinforces existing programs, such as Food for Work, and seeks to improve beneficiaries' purchasing power, especially in rural areas, by ensuring their financial independence through an appropriate and durable platform to assess their potential. Small environmental projects, such as farms for the production of gum Arabic, sand dunes, irrigation canals, and agricultural land are particularly targeted in these programs. The professionaliza-

tion of existing agricultural sectors (rice, sorghum, cowpea, dates, vegetables, etc.) would enable the program to procure locally, rather than obtaining supplies from international markets. There is also the hope that the new international aid dynamic will benefit the country, since Arab countries are increasingly investing in helping to combat insecurity in Mauritania, in addition to traditional donors whose contribution has slightly declined recently. The industrial private sector, especially extractive industries, could also be engaged in the fight against food insecurity. The ongoing discussions on the right to food and food sovereignty aim to raise the level of awareness and mobilization in order to impose better wealth distribution and improve targeting to give priority to direct beneficiaries, rights holders, and traditional landowners. Hopefully, these discussions and debates will lead to better wealth distribution among citizens even after achieving the above goal.

A handful of CSOs are currently active on the issue, including:

- **Mauritanian Food Security Network**
- **Food Security Network (ROSA)**
- **Environmental Development and Communication Association in Adrar (ADECA)**
- **Badelly Cooperative in city of Aleg, to exploit Balanite tree fruits**
- **The Collective of National Union Cooperatives in Munkel City in Gorgol Province to produce vegetables**
- **Union of Barbara Cooperatives for agricultural production and animal fattening**
- **Collective Action Association in the towns of Sibosira and Kodiol to exploit and develop forest products in Guidimaka Province.**

In general, partnership is on the rise in civil society despite various constraints, including the difficulty of accessing concessional financing resources. The decades-long experience of ADECA and the Federation of Oases Associations in Adrar, in support of agricultural producers in the oases, is a pioneering and promising effort to improve marketing channels and provide administrative, financial, and accounting expertise.

The Federation of Oases Associations in Adrar, a collective of agricultural producers, follows up on production and mobilizes producers for the participatory management of oases, by creating a dynamic to link all development initiatives in oases. It also plays a key role in facilitating access to seeds, fertilizers, and other agricultural inputs, as well as

supervision of product marketing and mobilizing human, material, and financial resources to achieve its objectives. The NGO ADECA, on the other hand, has been supporting oasis associations affiliated with the Federation for several years, providing the necessary expertise in the field of planning, studies, support of production techniques, communication, and administrative and institutional management. In any case, this is what the CSOs active in the field, especially ROSA, hope for and the aim of government policies and strategies. Transnational and multinational companies will continue to plunder Mauritania's wealth and resources, like gold, oil, gas, fish, and so on, enriching themselves without inhibition. Thus, it would be inappropriate and immoral to remain silent about a basic and crucial right such as the right to food, while the majority of the population suffers dearly to earn a living and face food insecurity.

But the question remains, what is the required civil society structure to enable it to contribute to achieving food security for Mauritania's population? In fact, several challenges exist. The structure of peasantry in the country is still unstable. Although the agricultural «cooperatives» model was the most popular in rural areas, their performance was not ideal and may have encouraged a spirit of dependency. Today, the majority of producers facing problems in marketing their products seek to further cluster and network in product associations to improve mass marketing conditions and elements (date division, dairy division, and rice, vegetables, and fish cooperatives).

The lack of a clear civil society structure in this regard and the absence of capacity building, support, and follow-up is due, in part, to the fact that Mauritania lacks large specialized production, which could help or motivate producers to create structures, as in the case of vegetables, sugar, wheat, cotton, coffee, and cocoa in similar countries.

## 11. Conclusions and Recommendations

In the current context of food price volatility and food-agricultural deficit, it is unlikely that Mauritania will achieve the first SDG (to eradicate hunger and extreme poverty) or that it will attain food sovereignty in the foreseeable future. Thus, Mauritanian CSOs<sup>37</sup> made several key recommendations to solve the problem and seek radical solutions that

<sup>37</sup> La Mauritanie et la FAO, ensemble pour l'éradication de la faim d'ici 2030, 26 Octobre 2017.

are not merely sedatives to seriously address the causes and predict the results.

### Priority Activities on the National Level

- **Improve social protection for vulnerable groups and poor households;**
- **Enhance nutrition in poor and vulnerable households;**

- Sustainable improvement of agricultural and food productivity and incomes of poor households and their access to food;
- Develop and rehabilitate the water infrastructure;
- Intensify and diversify agricultural production in rural and family farms;
- Increase the added value of livestock production and train breeders;
- Enhance exploitation of fishery products;
- Strengthen research, training, and advisory support;
- Strengthen food security governance and management.

The recommendations are summarized as follows:

- Prohibit and criminalize monopolies that help create and deepen the food gap;
- Take into account Mauritanian cultural and community specificities, especially those related to food and food culture;
- Abolish all taxes on food products and address changing food habits;
- Improve national capacities in planning, monitoring, evaluation, and forecasting;
- Monitor the flow of cereals from neighboring countries such as Senegal and Mali;
- Develop a scenario on the evolution of the food situation in the next ten years in the most vulnerable areas;
- Conduct a needs assessment in the event of shocks due to inflation in food prices;
- Adopt measures to supply inputs to improve agricultural production in the short and medium terms;
- Continue to implement strategic development measures related to food security (education, rural development, healthy nutrition, employment);
- Mobilize financial resources and coordination systems;
- Strengthen actions to mitigate food crises;
- Strengthen nutritional measures for children under 5 and pregnant and lactating women;
- Conduct an analytical survey of causes of malnutrition in high-prevalence countries;
- Restructure crisis management and intervention mechanisms in national disaster situations, to encourage NGO participation in the design and implementation of policies in this area;
- Accelerate the monitoring and evaluating process of the National Food Security Strategy and its and action plan through effective

**civil society and private sector engagement to address future food security challenges by 2020-2030.**

## 12. Summary

Given the multitude of constraining factors (such as lack of precipitation, undeveloped agricultural production, lack of fixed income, supply constraints, the country's vast area, poor infrastructure, chaotic settlement, illiteracy, isolation, etc.), the Mauritanian Republic is considered by food security specialists to be suffering from a structural food security deficit.

Food security is an existential question, before being a humanitarian or political economic issue. It is also a central factor in the population's economic and social development. It contributes to the stability of the state and is a prerequisite for economic and social development in any country, especially in Mauritania. However, food security cannot be achieved without the contribution of all actors, especially the community (including civil society). Fragile living conditions, especially for the rural population, and growing poverty impacting more

than 1 million Mauritians in rural and peri-urban areas make food security difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. The situation of food security and food sovereignty in Mauritania is not totally bad. Rather, it is one of critical issues facing the country. However, although the authorities do not exert much effort to provide food security, external factors remain the main determinants in a country like Mauritania, which faces many challenges, the simplest of which are climate challenges. Internal challenges, such as ignorance, disease, high temperatures, illiteracy, and a lack of work provide a bleaker picture.