UNHCR Mauritania Country Strategy Evaluation 2020-2022

Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

Evaluation team:

Robina Shaheen, Eva López, Enric Grau, Boubacar Aw, José Manuel Baldó

Executive summary

PURPOSE, SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

The UNHCR Evaluation Office has commissioned an evaluation of the country strategy in Mauritania at the request of the Representative to assess UNHCR's interventions during the period 2020-2022. The geographical scope of the evaluation is national, but it focuses on UNHCR's intervention areas in the country, namely Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, and the Mbera camp and its surroundings (Bassikounou municipality, Hodh Chargui region).

The four objectives of the evaluation are to: i) assess the strategic relevance, coherence, effectiveness, challenges, and opportunities of UNHCR in Mauritania; ii) provide evidence of how and why UNHCR's interventions have improved or not improved the lives of the people with and for whom UNHCR works; iii) determine the extent to which UNHCR's capacities, structures, and processes are aligned and adapted to the implementation of the strategy; and iv) draw lessons and make recommendations to improve UNHCR's actions in Mauritania.

The evaluated period was characterized by internal reforms within UNHCR, which include: (i) a change in the structure and approach to strategic planning, aligned with the spirit of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR); (ii) regionalization and decentralization to strengthen operations in countries through increased powers and additional capacities; and (iii) the development of multi-year strategies at the country level for the first time within the organization. In Mauritania, these reforms are being implemented gradually during the evaluated period but are particularly visible from 2022 onwards.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation adopted principles of participation and utilization and had both summative and formative aspects. It used a theory-based approach as evaluation framework to understand both what worked and why it worked, capitalize on strengths, and mitigate weaknesses of the UNHCR's strategy to promote internal learning. The evaluation is organized around four main questions, broken down into 12 sub-questions, organized at three levels - strategic, programmatic, and operational - related to relevance, coherence, coordination, efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability criteria.

Data collection was conducted in the field and virtually, using a mixed methods approach relying on primary and secondary sources. Data collection methods included: i) document review; ii) semi-structured interviews (146 interviewees); iii) focus group discussions (10 FGDs organized); iv) direct observations; v) timelines; vi) participation in the UNHCR roadmap, and; vii) reflection workshops. The four workshops for presenting results and discussing findings and recommendations allowed for better participation and ownership of the results.

To structure the analysis, data and results were grouped and examined by evaluation question, investigative domain, and triangulated by data type, method, data source, and evaluator. Quality control was based on UNHCR's evaluation quality guide, UNEG standards, and good practices from ALNAP and OECD/CAD. It was conducted internally by the evaluation team and externally by UNHCR. The evaluation followed guidelines for integrating gender equality and human rights principles according to the UNEG manual (2011).

One of the challenges encountered by the evaluation was analyzing a three-year period based on UNHCR's annual planning and the introduction of the new planning and monitoring system in 2022. The operational and budgetary impact of COVID-19 in 2020 also altered the analysis of trends. Mitigation measures to address these limitations were agreed upon with UNHCR throughout the process.

FINDINGS

Q1. How has UNHCR positioned itself strategically in the country considering the needs of the individuals under its mandate and the context? (alignment, coherence, and relevance)

UNHCR has taken advantage of a favorable context, with a historically welcoming government that made significant commitments at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum (GRF). UNHCR's operations are fully aligned with the country's main development strategies, including Strategy of Accelerated Growth and Shared Prosperity in the priority regions (SCAPP) and the Development Policy (LPD), which clearly emphasize the protection and inclusion of the refugee population. UNHCR plays a key role in various coordination forums and platforms related to the refugee population at the central, Bassikounou, and Nouadhibou levels.

UNHCR had to adapt its operations while maintaining its strategy in a context that, while stable at the national level, was continuously changing and evolving at the conjunctural, protection, sectoral, and funding availability levels. Aware of the limitations and challenges, the UNHCR team made pragmatic strategic choices based on the principle of good collaboration with the Government of Mauritania to improve the living conditions of the people to the best extent possible.

UNHCR's operations addressed protection in two different contexts: mixed movements in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott and the Malian refugee camp in Mbera, which faced an extended crisis situation with no near-term solutions and a continuous influx of refugees. Conceptually, the needs were similar for both population types, but they differed in terms of demographic profiles and modalities of assistance or services received.

At the United Nations system level, UNHCR was involved in all three strategic axes of the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), and the refugee population is fully integrated into the UNSDCF. Collaboration between UNHCR and UNDP was crucial for coordinating development and humanitarian actions in Hodh Chargui (HC), a priority intervention zone for the United Nations and the Government of Mauritania (GoM). At the sub-regional level, there was limited involvement of UNHCR in forums addressing Sahel issues, possibly due to UNHCR's organizational placement of Mauritania within the MENA region.

Q2. In terms of effectiveness, what have been the results in the areas of assistance, protection, and solutions?

UNHCR has established technical working spaces and dialogue with key government agencies at both the central and decentralized levels, thanks to institutional trust in its mandate, sustained operational capacity, and expanded territorial presence. The international commitments of the GoM and the willingness of institutions supported by UNHCR contributed to expanding the protection space: access to territory, non-refoulement, freedom of movement, documentation, registration, Refugee Status Determination (RSD) and inclusion. However, challenges persisted in advancing essential issues related to international protection, such as the adoption of an asylum law, access to the 1961 stateless convention, technical capacities of the National Registry of Populations and Secure Titles (ANRPTS) for refugee registration, and registration in remote areas.

Regarding child protection, UNHCR focused on this population due to its high proportion in the camp. Efforts were made in the area of access to documentation, but progress remained limited. Lack of resources prevented a protection response to refugee children in remote rural areas or those exposed to other risks in urban contexts.

In a context of limited access to public services, UNHCR's cash-based interventions (CBIs) have been focused to strengthen resilience and social cohesion. CBI interventions mitigated immediate needs (exacerbated during COVID-19) and contributed to monetary circulation within the Mbera camp and its surroundings, but available data did not allow a precise assessment of their contribution to self-reliance.

Housing, access to water, and sanitation services were maintained by UNHCR at the Mbera camp in a humanitarian model, in the absence of clear long-term solutions with the authorities.

The transfer of health services in Mbera is effective at the management level but not yet at the financing level. UNHCR provided significant support to capacity building and infrastructure, including the response to the COVID-19 crisis, but maintaining quality and long-term funding remains a challenge.

The implementation of the school inclusion agenda in Mauritania is in its early stages. Funds have gradually been redirected from supporting refugee children in private schools to supporting enrollments in public schools in urban areas. In Mbera (which has critical indicators and follows the Malian curriculum), UNHCR has made efforts to explore ways to transfer the service to the national system. The dynamics seem positive, but there are many challenges, including quality, funding, governance, low student enrollment rates, and high absenteeism, which require long-term efforts.

UNHCR has emphasized a community-based protection approach to empower and empower individuals, especially women, who have played a significant role in issues such as persons with specific needs, child protection, and Gender Based Violence (GBV). Community services in the camp are also organized on a voluntary basis, raising questions about sustainability more than ten years after the camp was established, blurring the line between what should be voluntary and what should be professionalized services.

In an economic and national development context that is not conducive to the self-reliance of the people with and for whom UNHCR works, and in the face of prolonged crisis, UNHCR's operation is one of the most advanced in terms of engagement in the "humanitarian, development, peace" nexus. Its role has been strategic in the process of including refugees, whether through direct actions, advocacy, support to national sectoral institutions, or as a catalyst. UNHCR has initiated actions for social, economic, and financial inclusion, while strengthening national services (health, education) and local development, resulting in transformations. The integration of refugees into the national social protection and health system, self-reliance and employability activities, and private sector involvement are some examples. However, most of these transformations are still in their early stages. Specifically, there is experience in income-generating activities (IGAs) of a productive nature that seem to play a significant role in this economic empowerment, and some value chains are beginning to perform well (e.g., dried meat production, surplus agricultural sales, butchers, gas distribution, textile and clothing trade). However, during this period, when there were no IGAs for urban refugees, the dispersion of data makes it difficult to have a precise view of their effectiveness.

UNHCR has had a clear catalytic effect in the HDP nexus, with Mauritania's eligibility for IDA Refugee Sub Window funds from the World Bank, the integration of refugees into the UNDAF 2018-22, and Hodh Chargui (HC) region into the convergence zones of the UN Country Team. However, the execution of some development funds has been challenging due to a modus operandi of UNHCR that is not adapted. Despite sharing data and the needs of the people with and for whom UNHCR works, as part of various coordination platforms and bilaterally, there has been some dissatisfaction among actors with the information available on Mbera regarding the activities carried out and the level of knowledge about the socio-economic profile of its population.

UNHCR participates in the coordination and implementation of all development and inclusion actions in the Mbera camp and surrounding areas. However, it currently lacks a comprehensive approach agreed with the authorities that provides guidance on the integration of the Mbera camp into the territorial development plan of the Bassikounou district, taking into account security, environmental, social, urban, economic, infrastructural, and institutional challenges.

In terms of social cohesion, this is a relatively exceptional context where collective efforts, both local and international, as well as by refugees, in Mbera and neighboring villages, have succeeded in maintaining social peace between the two communities. However, in a territory with limited resources and exposed to the effects of climate change, the balance is fragile.

Q3. To what extent have available resources been used efficiently? (staffing structure, regionalization, decentralization, Mauritania - Mali coordination)

The budget growth of the operation has significantly strengthened its presence and scope of action in Mauritania. Despite this continuous progression, there is a widespread internal concern about the inadequacy of human resources to meet the ambitions of the operation (reduction of the backlog for RSD procedures, capacity to respond to a massive influx of refugees, food/environmental crisis, or diversification of entry points). In terms of the organizational chart, the relationship between hierarchies and assignment to functional groups is difficult to discern in some cases (e.g., Nouadhibou, compartmentalization between units).

The regionalization process appears to be very satisfactory from a technical standpoint, with the provision of tools, guidelines, and expertise by the MENA Regional Bureau as needed. However, there seems to have been relatively irregular interaction between the regional bureau and the operation in terms of strategic analysis and discussions (based on the limited available information). The decentralization of the operation in Mauritania is clearly positive in a context of different dynamics by zones and a continuous increase in refugees and asylum seekers. However, several challenges have been identified regarding coordination and communication between field offices.

Q4. How can UNHCR leverage the results achieved, current challenges, and opportunities to better exploit its strategic position, comparative advantage, and influence within the country and the region to advance collective efforts for protection and solutions? (sustainability)

In the period evaluated, UNHCR has worked effectively to integrate the people with and for whom UNHCR works into basic social services and the labor market at various levels and in different locations. However, its strategy appears to be highly dependent on World Bank projects as structuring initiatives for inclusion in the Hodh Chargui region. Furthermore, some challenges remain to be addressed, such as the inclusion of all refugees in basic public services within a reasonable timeframe upon arrival, the sustainability, and the quality of these services.

Given its comparative advantage in refugee-specific coordination, UNHCR's role in the inclusion program and more broadly in the Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) nexus is not well understood by all stakeholders, not even internally, where the two schools - humanitarian and development - are trying to align. There is a perception of competition with development actors. UNHCR's strategy to support government efforts to promote the exercise of rights and the inclusion of refugees, while effective, has not succeeded in promoting, due to contextual factors, a systemic approach to developing the national asylum system. Therefore, it is not appropriate at this stage to consider the sustainability of the national asylum system.

CONCLUSIONS

Strategic Level

1 CS2. Institutional protection framework and national asylum system - UNHCR, in support of the Government of Mauritania (GoM), has advanced the protection space and demonstrated responsiveness and flexibility to adapt its protection response to diverse contexts (mixed movements, Mbera camp, increasing arrival of Malian refugees). The GoM's position on asylum and the integration of Malian refugees has been crucial for ensuring protection, although some issues have not progressed as planned (e.g., asylum law, prevention of risk of statelessness and access to civil documentation). However, the delegation of responsibilities from the state to UNHCR (RSD, asylum) may prolong dependence, and UNHCR has not had the opportunity to significantly advance the legal framework and institutional capacities.

2 CS3. HDP Nexus - UNHCR's work in Mauritania, in conjunction with the GoM, the World Bank, and other development actors, has been fundamental to advancing inclusion, but it is still too early to observe solid results. UNHCR, played a key role in initiating development projects, however, it has faced different logics and mechanisms of development intervention implementation for which it was not adequately prepared.

From the perspective of the HDP nexus, the preservation of social cohesion has been a crucial element promoted by UNHCR, but this social cohesion is in a fragile balance due to limited resources, exposure to environmental uncertainties, increasing demographic pressure, and security risks.

Operational Level

3 CO1. Response to protection and assistance needs - UNHCR has expanded its geographical coverage and adapted its operations to provide an effective protection and humanitarian response to a wide variety of protection needs, changing contexts requiring tailored approaches, diverse population profiles, and successive crises (COVID-19, measles outbreak in Mbera, refugee influx in 2022). However, the operationalization of protection has faced challenges such as: i) modest national resources and capacities; (ii) difficulties in accessing civil documentation; (iii) "temporary" management of RSD by UNHCR; (iv) different situations for access to the RSD procedure between refugees in Mbera and urban refugees; (v) registration of refugees settled in remote locations. The persistence of extreme vulnerability indicators, malnutrition, or the continuous arrival of Malian refugees in the Mbera camp has clearly justified the continuation of humanitarian assistance, as well as the shift towards inclusion and empowerment, especially considering that most Malian refugees have been residing in Mauritania since 2012.

4 CO2. Response to inclusion and self-reliance needs - Despite initial positive effects, inclusion efforts have faced challenges such as dependency on international funding, the complexity of implementing development projects, difficulties in accessing civil documentation, some sociocultural barriers, and the gradual reduction of humanitarian assistance without a clear improvement in socio-economic conditions in the Mbera camp. Inclusion in the national social protection and healthcare system is the most advanced, although external funds are still necessary for both areas. In terms of education, the situation of refugee children in the Mbera camp has become critical. UNHCR's visible efforts to promote IGAs as a strategy for self-reliance and social cohesion have been positively appreciated. However, financial inclusion is still in its early stages, despite UNHCR's ability to mobilize the banking sector. Additionally, the limited resources allocated do not reflect the central role of IGAs as a path to self-reliance and self-employment.

5 CO3. Mbera camp - The orderly management of the camp and the leadership of the refugee community have been decisive factors in responding to the influx of people, providing a humanitarian response, stabilizing the camp, and making it a model of internal organization in some areas. However, the roadmap defined in 2020 by UNHCR for the transition of Mbera ("urbanization") shows modest progress, as some of the premises and actions have not taken place. The absence of a homogeneous vision among national institutions regarding the evolution of the Mbera camp has made it difficult to develop a strategy for its integration into a territorial development plan. In this context, territorial equity appears as a central aspect of social cohesion in an area subject to increasing demographic pressure and fragile balances between communities. In fact, UNHCR's interventions have not been able to prevent the overexploitation of natural resources, creating risks to social cohesion between communities, despite some recent interventions and good practices in environmental protection.

Organizational Level

6 COrg1. Regionalization and sub-regional coordination - The assessment of regionalization appears to be very satisfactory from a technical standpoint but more mixed at the strategic level. In the context of the situation in the Sahel, UNHCR's response to the sub-regional crisis and the deterioration of the conflict in Mali was coordinated by the UNHCR West Africa Regional Office, which limited the integration of the UNHCR office in Mauritania (which falls under the UNHCR MENA Regional Office) into internal forums for strategic analysis and planning regarding the Sahel situation and in international platforms. In the context of mixed movements, communication with the UNHCR office in Senegal does not appear to be clearly structured.

7 COrg2. Human resources - In a context of growing human resources, there appear to be some territorial, functional, and programmatic imbalances that the ongoing internal staffing review can address. Limited human resources and working in "silos" have been critical factors in the development, livelihoods,

registration, and community-based protection teams. Moreover, the decentralization system, with a field unit in Nouadhibou and a sub-office in Bassikounou, presents a challenge in achieving the right balance between sufficient autonomy and ensuring proper coordination and support from the main office. High turnover, especially among international staff, has limited the capacity for knowledge transfer and institutional memory within the operation and seems to have generated fatigue and frustration among national staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic Level

RS1. Strengthen political and institutional advocacy (at both central and local levels) for updating and adopting the national asylum law and make progress in establishing effective protection mechanisms (civil documentation, statelessness) within the framework of international commitments adopted by the GooM and its participation in the Global Refugee Forum 2023.

RS2. Reinforce UNHCR's positioning in the HDP nexus and initiatives for the inclusion of refugee individuals to national institutions, humanitarian and development actors, as well as refugee and host communities, with a view to enhance coordination and resource optimization.

Operational Level

RO1. Evolution of the Mbera camp: Promote an integrated evolution of the Mbera camp within a territorial development and planning framework with active participation of refugee and host communities, while integrating environmental preservation, climate change-related risks, and a scenario of continuous arrival of Malian refugees.

RO2. Protection: Capitalize on the experiences of different offices to strengthen access to protection and harmonization of procedures where possible.

RO3. Data on individuals with and for whom UNHCR works and inclusion: Establish a system to update profiles of individuals with and for whom UNHCR works, both in Mbera and in urban areas, in order to better document and understand the evolution of socio-economic needs, strengthen advocacy capacity, and evidence-based decision-making, as well as enhance the response to the most vulnerable profiles within an inclusion approach.

RO4. Economic inclusion within a sustainable development (environmental preservation and climate change effects) and social cohesion approach: Strengthen the empowerment and economic inclusion of refugee populations based on social cohesion, sustainable development, and enterprise approach (SMEs and micro-enterprises).

RO5. UNHCR's position on refugee access to education and the transfer of services offered in the Mbera camp to the national public system: Strengthen the monitoring system for refugee children's access to education and organize the transfer of camp services to the national system in consultation with all relevant stakeholders, including refugees, with a vision of sustainability.

Organizational Level

ROrg.1. UNHCR's positioning in coordination mechanisms regarding the Sahel region and mixed movements: Strengthen UNHCR's strategic participation in Mauritania with the UNHCR West Africa Regional Bureau to improve coordination and actions related to the Sahel situation and mixed movements.

ROrg.2. Adjust the distribution of human resources within the operation and strengthen the necessary expertise in response to growing needs in terms of protection, inclusion, and the dynamics of location of people with and for whom UNHCR works in various locations.