

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF REFUGEE ARRIVALS IN MAURITANIA SINCE 2023

Analysis of UNHCR and WFP data on
Malian refugees living in Mauritania

October 2024



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Content and motivation

This policy brief aims to provide a better understanding of the socio-economic profile of recently arrived Malian refugees (since 2023) living in Mauritania to support the Government of Mauritania’s plan to include refugees more broadly into national services. This brief explains the context and goals of generating a socio-economic profile for this population, describes the types and sources of data included, and the methods used. It then draws on the data to develop a socio-economic profile of the newly arrived Malian refugees, considering basic demographic variables, household composition and timing of displacement, living conditions, and assets, with a particular focus on livestock given its importance in the regional economy.

Neighbouring countries bear most of the responsibility of hosting displaced populations and the wider socio-economic consequences of conflict and violence in their region. Of the three possible durable solutions for forced displacement (voluntary repatriation, third-country resettlement, and local integration into the hosting country), the de facto outcome for most displaced populations has been some degree of local integration in host countries, often in response to protracted displacement situations. This presents a triple challenge for hosting countries: an immediate humanitarian response, which eventually transitions to development and integration policies, ultimately including liberalization of refugee policy regimes in some contexts.

Mauritania has a generous open-door policy towards refugees and asylum-seekers, hosting Malian refugees since 2012. As of the end of July 2024, UNHCR estimates that Mauritania hosts approximately 233,240 Malian refugees and asylum seekers across urban and rural areas. At the 2019 Global Refugee Forum (GRF), Mauritania pledged to allow refugees access to the labour market, to include them in the national health system, and to improve documentation coverage. In the 2023 GRF, Mauritania renewed these pledges and additionally pledged to develop a new asylum law, provide refugees access to social protection services on par with nationals, and include them in the national education system. The country also committed to transforming Mbera refugee camp into a sustainable human settlement. At present, Mauritania receives World Bank (WB) funding to support refugee inclusion in health, water and sanitation, social protection, and local development services.¹ However, due to a difficult economic and social context, especially among host populations, the continuing and increasing influx of refugees is raising interest from host community for a durable solution to end displacement of Malian refugees.

Figure 1. Share of registered Malian refugees by country by asylum

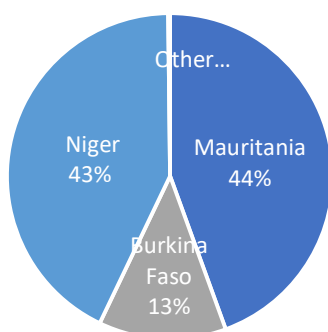
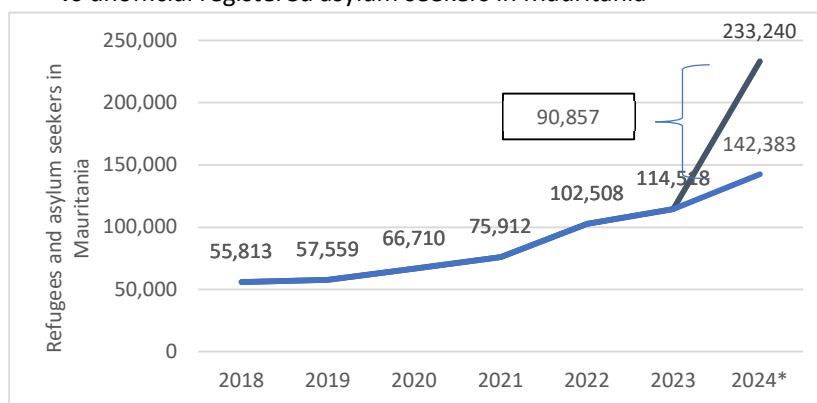


Figure 2. Cumulative number of Malian refugees and official vs unofficial registered asylum seekers in Mauritania



Note: For Figure 1 this data reflects the UNHCR May 2024 official population figures of registered refugee and asylum seekers. Here “other refugee-hosting countries of Malian refugee and asylum seekers” include the Central African Republic (1,328), the Republic of Congo (54) and Democratic Republic of Congo (288), Togo (41) and Nigeria (81) (UNHCR, 2024a). In Figure 2 data in blue (Black) represents the annual registered (estimated) Malian refugee and asylum seekers living in Mauritania and latest figures for 2024 are from UNHCR operations data as of July 2024 (UNHCR 2024b).

¹ The World Bank projects in the [IDA Sub-Window for Host Communities and Refugees](#) include the [Water and Sanitation Sectoral Project P167328](#); [Health System Support Additional Financing P170585](#); [Decentralization and Productive Intermediate Cities Support Project P169332](#); [Social Safety Net System Project II- P171125](#).

The volatile security situation in the region has significantly increased those being forcibly displaced from Mali, effectively doubling the number of Malian refugees in Mauritania since 2023 (Figure 2). This surge requires timely, comprehensive socio-economic analysis to inform the Government of Mauritania's commitments to include refugees in basic services and social protection programmes amid persistent acute poverty. Many developing host countries are simultaneously affected by the destabilizing consequences of fragility and violence in neighbouring countries. Often, these host countries face waves of displacement with limited ability and time to prepare. To fill this identified gap, this brief is the first to generate a socio-economic profile of the Malian refugees having arrived in Mauritania since 2023.

The remainder of this brief is structured as follows. The next section describes the data and surveys used for this analysis. It then provides a comparative description of forcibly displaced populations along key axes: basic demographics, living conditions, assets, and livestock, before concluding with the main findings.

Data sources and methodological considerations

This dataset is a result of a survey that was enumerated in the first quarter of 2024 overseen by the World Food Programme (WFP) and supported by UNHCR. The survey aimed to interview every household that had arrived since the 2023 influx who were living in the Hodh Chargui region. To identify the newly arrived households, WFP worked with UNHCR data indicating their location. WFP, UNHCR, and Association Nutrition et Développement (ANED), the implementing partner, then organized a meeting with local leaders to announce the survey and solicit their assistance in conducting this survey. After this meeting, the leaders shared the geographic limits of each village, agreed to sensitize residents to the importance of participating, after which every household was visited and invited to participate in the interview. As such, this dataset is unique as it represents a full sample survey, and the analysis is robust in representing the socio-economic profile of Malian refugees. The survey approach which worked closely with local community leaders was successful at maximizing identification of Malian refugee arrivals and thus reached a high percentage of all Malian refugees living in the region, thus resulting in a tremendously rich dataset.²

Table 1. Surveys contributing data to the analysis

Survey name	Date	Representativeness	Number of households surveyed	Agency overseeing data collection
2024 Targeting of Assistance for New Malian Refugee Arrivals	Feb 15 to March 18, 2024	Refugees	11,993 households	WFP

Figure 3. Malian refugees surveyed are located in the Hodh Chargui Region highlighted in red



The majority of recently arrived refugees live out-of-camp in remote areas. Overall, the refugees represent a marginal percentage of the host community, except in Bassiknou, where most of the refugees live and account for 68% of the local population and 3% in the town of Adel Bagrou (Table 2). According to IFRC, the majority of displaced people are food insecure, lack adequate shelter and latrines, resulting in the common practice of open defecation, and they do not have enough safe drinking water (IFRC, 2024).

More than three-quarters of new arrivals reported arriving in the last three months, or December 2023 to February 2024 (76%), with most of the remainder arriving in the past year (23%) (Figure 4). The percentage of new arrivals in different geographic areas varies over

² Due to the survey being a full sample there are no sample weights needed.

time. Adel Bagrou and Amourj saw the fewest arrivals in the last three months and the majority in the past year, while Bassiknou and Djigueni have predominantly received new arrivals in the last three months.

Notably the official border crossings between Mauritania and Mali have been closed since January 2020 following a decree signed by the Government at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. While administratively and legally the border remains closed in practice, humanitarian partners have observed that people continue to cross the border in both directions without issue.

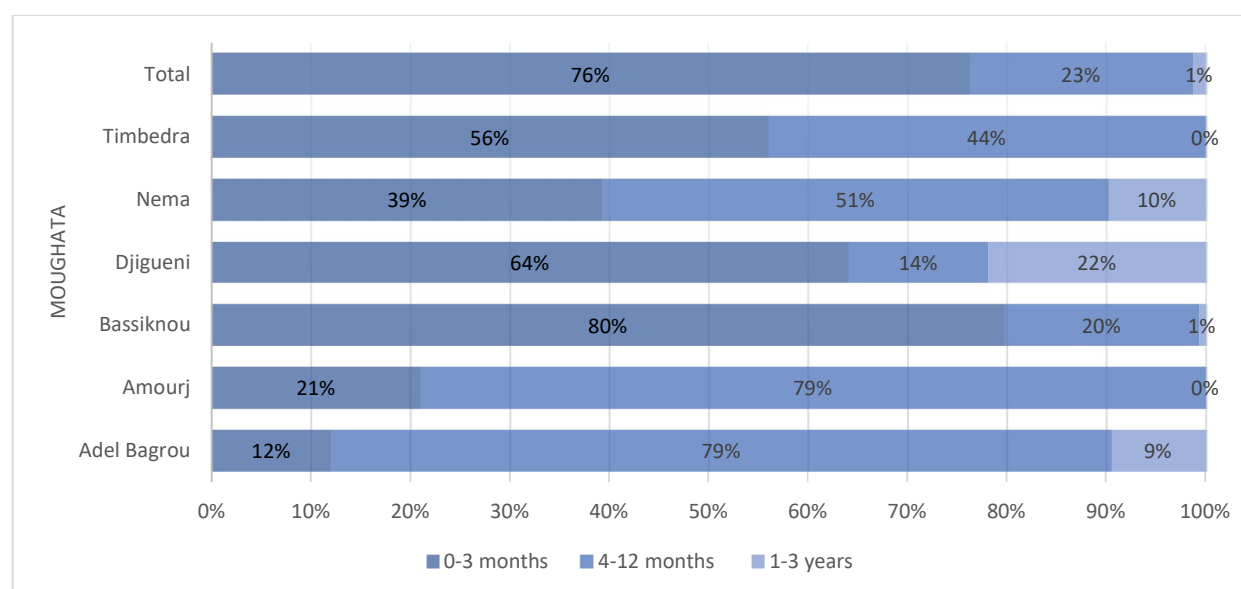
Table 2. Population estimates by geographic breakdown of survey coverage

Moughata (or Departments) *	Area (km squared)	Latest host population official estimates*	New Malian Refugee Arrivals since 2023 (# of hhlds in parentheses)	Refugees as a percentage of local host community
Adel Bagrou		36,007	1,220 (226)	3%
Amourj	9,200	94,559	848 (157)	1%
Bassiknou	16,500	88,432	59,729 (11,061)	68%
Djigueni	3,900	59,614	767 (142)	1%
Nema	10,000	87,048	1,166 (216)	1%
Timbedra	9,100	79,069	761 (141)	0%

Note: The host population comes from the latest publicly available census from 2013. To estimate the Malian refugee new arrivals, the number of households are multiplied by the average household size of 5.4 people.

*Mauritania is divided into 12 "wilayahs" in Arabic, translated as states, from which these wilayahs are subdivided into the second level of administrative division called "moughatas" or departments. There are 53 administrative departments (Moughatas) at present in Mauritania.

Figure 4. Percentage of households surveyed and date of arrival



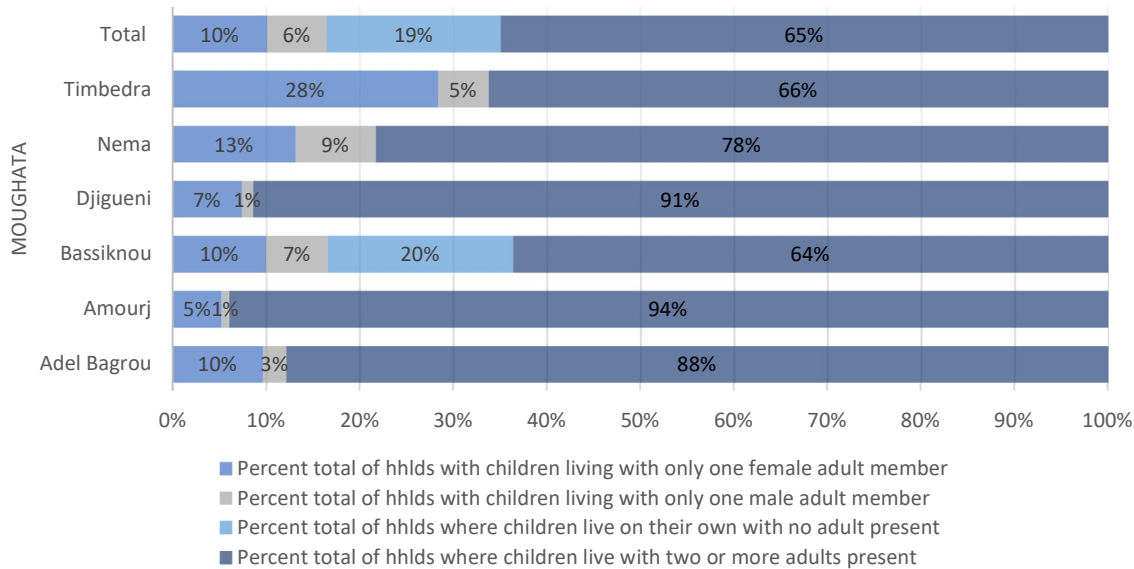
Demographics

One third of Malian refugees report either living with only one adult or no adults at all, in line with the well-known trend that forcibly displaced women and children tend to precede other family members. Analysis of available data from the 11,993 households surveyed shows that on average, 91% have at least one child aged 17 or younger living in the household. Of these households with children, two-thirds have two adult members living

with them.

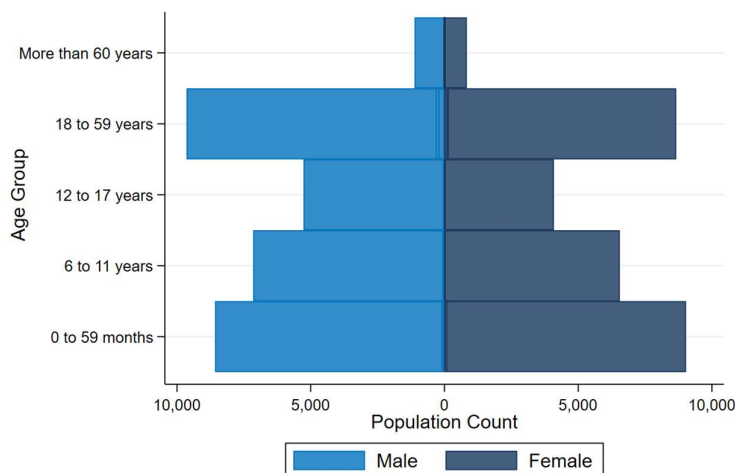
On average, nearly one in five children (19%) live alone with no adult present, while one in ten (10%) live with only one female adult member, and 6% live with only one male adult member. Notably, there are differences by Moughata (administrative level 2, equivalent to departments). Timbedra has the highest number of households with children—more than one quarter— living with only one female adult member. Households with only children and no adult present are clustered in Bassiknou, which has the greatest number of households—one in five—with only children and no adult present (Figure 5). Timbedra has the highest percentage (28%) of households headed by one female adult.

Figure 5. Share of children migrating with a single adult, two adults or separately



The age pyramid reveals, on average, a young population (60 percent of the population are less than 18 years old) with very few individuals above the age of 60 (Figure 6). **On average the household size is 5.4 people.**

Figure 6. Age pyramid for the newly arrived Malian refugees



This trend mirrors those seen in other forcibly displaced settings. A recent analysis of combined data from Ecuador, Peru, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Bangladesh, Chad, Niger, Ethiopia, and Uganda shows that the percentage of households with female heads is higher among displaced than non-displaced ones (Vishwanath et al, 2023).

Other research finds that female-headed households are more prevalent in refugee communities. In both Uganda and Kenya, refugee households are twice as likely as host households to be female-headed (Beltramo et al. 2023).

Figure 7a. Share of household heads who are women

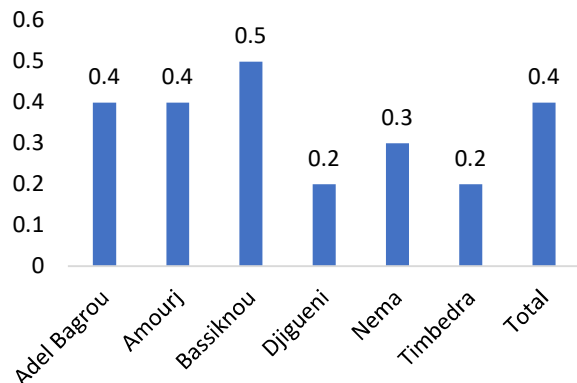
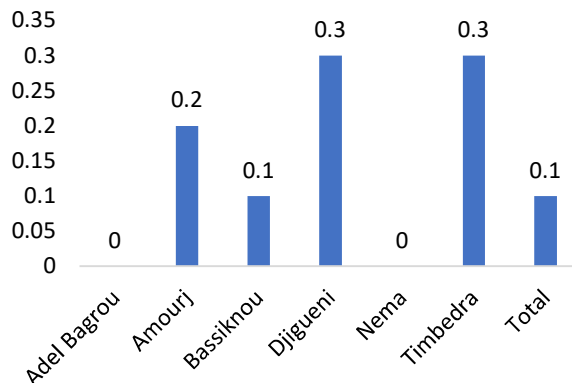


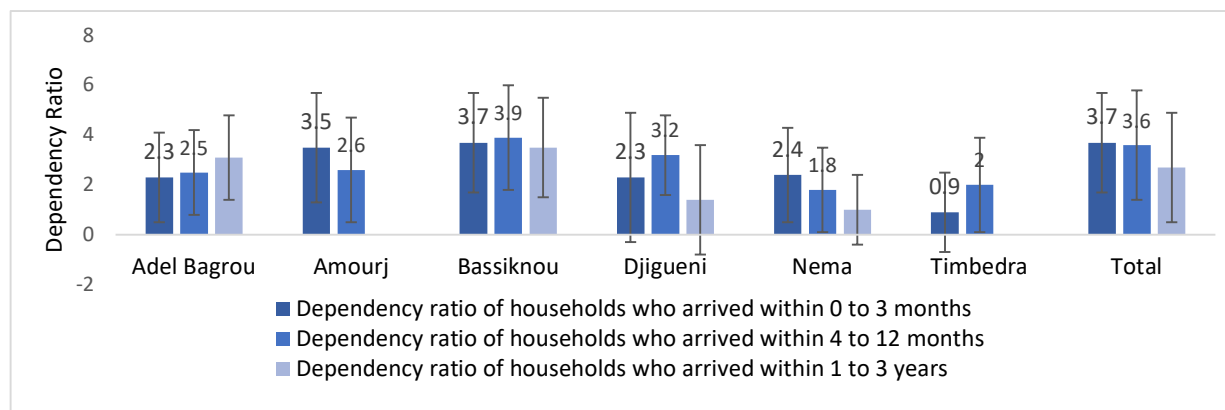
Figure 7b. Share of household heads who are handicapped



On average, four out of ten refugee households are headed by women (Figure 7a) - a large portion of household heads compared to 35.9% for hosted household at national level (source: Ansade, 2021) — and 10% are persons with disabilities (7b). The high number of households with adult with disabilities is reflected in the dependency ratio. Respondents were asked to indicate all adult members by gender who were “handicapped”.³ Due to the relatively limited livelihoods opportunities available for refugees (and hosts) and the high prevalence of agriculture work (livestock and crops), which requires physical activity, having a disability is likely to limit income-earning in this setting.

The dependency ratio is extremely high, highlighting the extreme vulnerability of children among the new arrivals. On average, the dependency ratio for all new arrivals is 3.6. The ratio does not differ significantly by the date of arrival for the newly arrived refugees from Mali.

Figure 8. Dependency Ratio by Moughata and date of arrival or refugee households



Note: The dependency ratio is defined as those children aged 17 and below as well as adults aged 60 and above as a proportion of household members aged 18 to 60 who are considered by the household head as capable of working. For

³ It is recommended given the high incidence of individuals self-reported by households to be suffering from a “handicap” in future surveys to measure disability using the [Washington Group Set on of six questions](#) on functioning which is a global standard for measuring disability.

two sites, Amourj and Timbedra, there are no Malian refugees who arrived within 1 to 3 years.⁴

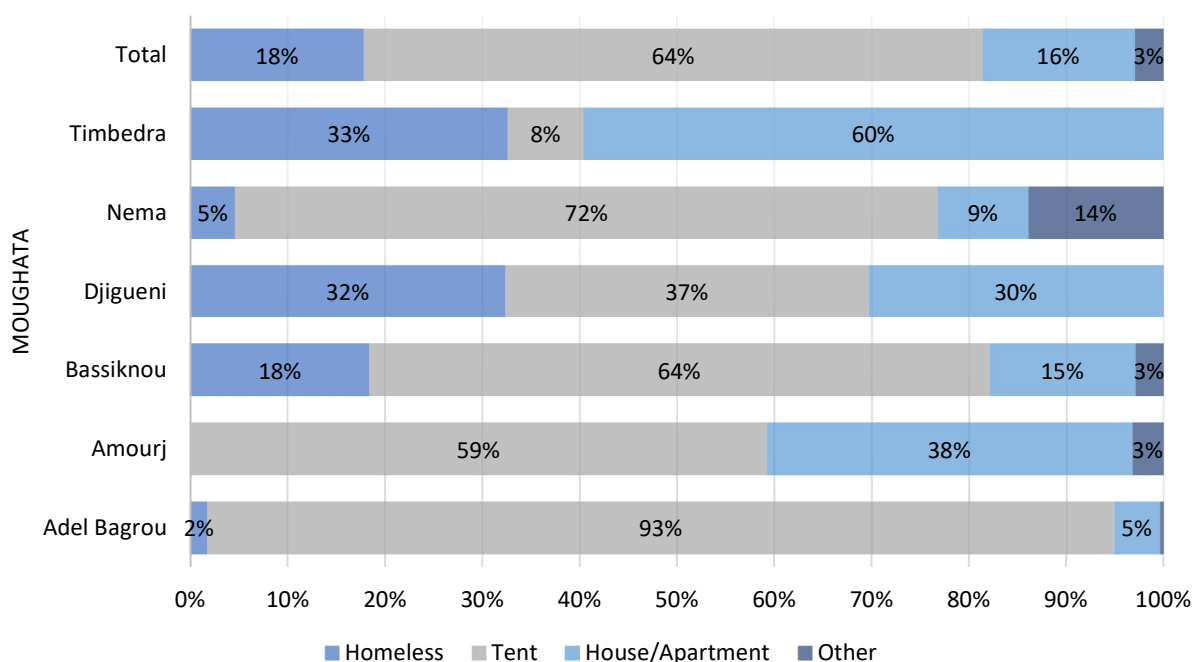
Living conditions and assets

Overall, housing conditions are very precarious, with more than four out of five households either living in tents (64%) or homeless (18%). Timbedra and Djigueni have the highest incidence of homeless refugees, with nearly a third reporting having no home. Water and sanitation standards are far below the Sphere standards, with only 3% of households indicating they have access to a latrine or toilet at home.

Some 95% of the newly arrived Malians report that their main sources of water are running taps in a house (25%), boreholes (36%), and unprotected wells (34%). There are slightly more households who report their main source of water is a tap than those that live in a house. This is likely explained by the practice of households borrowing water from a neighbour's apartment/ house tap.

Looking at mobile phone ownership, only 6% of the 11,993 households interviewed say they own one.

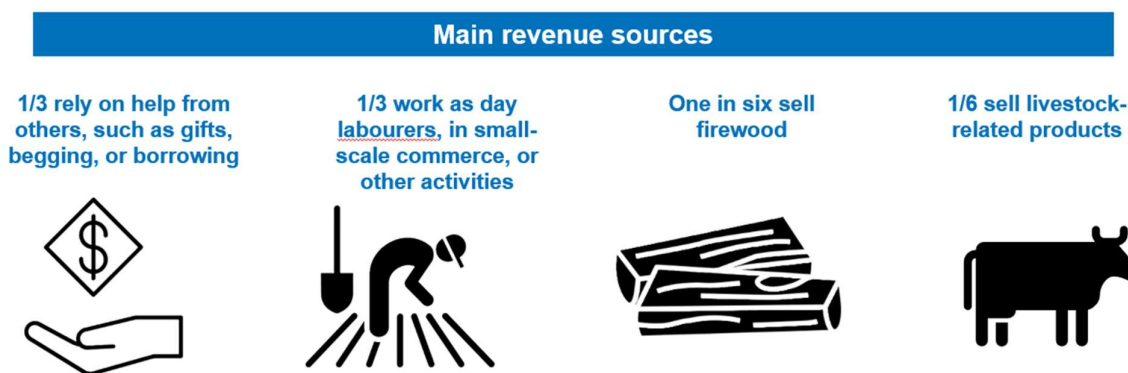
Figure 9. Type of accommodation by Moughata



The reported primary source of revenue reveals significant fragility among the newly arrived Malians. Nearly all work in the informal market, with only 39 out of 11,391 individuals reporting employment with a salary and pension. One-third of the population say their main source of revenue was help from others, including gifts, begging, or borrowing money. About one in three reports working as day labourers (9%) or in small-scale commerce (19%) or other activities (6%). One in six sell firewood for their main income, and another one in six sell livestock-related products (Figure 10).⁵

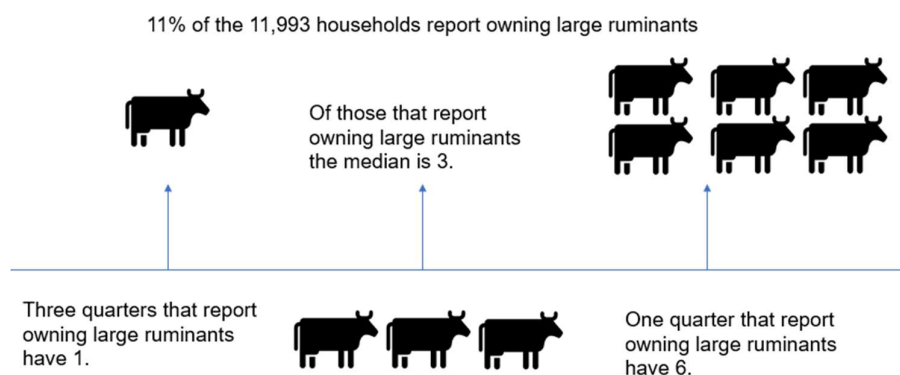
⁴ There are two adaptations to the standard dependency ratio. The first is driven by data limitations which only captures age range of 12 to 17 years of age. This limitation limits our ability to align with a standard ILO definition of 15 years and above as working age. Second due to the high number of households that include a disabled adult with limited ability to work in jobs available to refugees we adapt the denominator of the dependency ratio to include only working age members 18 to 60 years of age whom the household head deems capable of working.

⁵ The more detailed breakdown is as follows with 7% (12%) reporting working in small-scale commerce in agriculture (non-agriculture) and 4% (5%) as day labourers in (non-agriculture).

Figure 10. Summary of main source of revenue

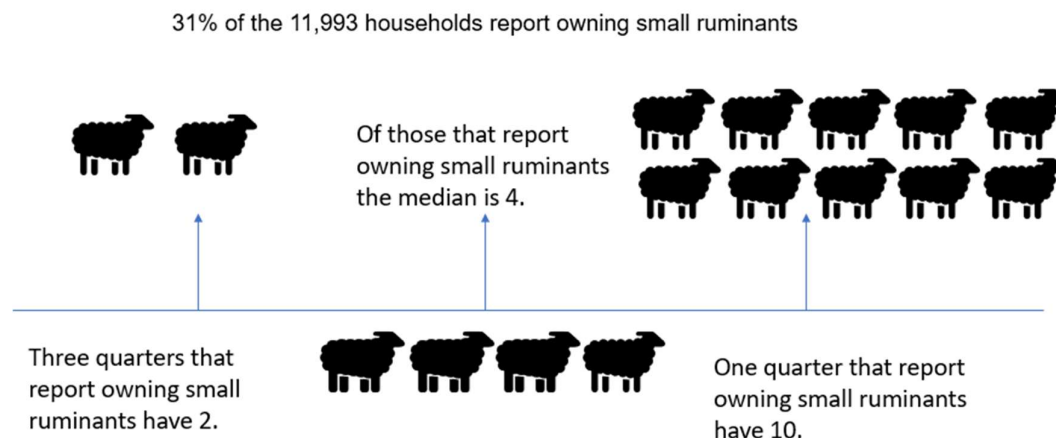
Livestock ownership

Pastoral mobility or transhumance is a long-standing tradition in Mauritania, where pastoralists, sometimes entire families including children, move in search of water and pasture (IOM, 2024). A 2024 report notes that ongoing conflict in Mali has disrupted the normal cross-border transhumance corridor from Mauritania to Mali during this past winter. This disruption, caused by rising insecurity in Mali, has increased pressure on pastoral resources in Mauritania, particularly in Bassiknou and Adel Bagrou (IOM, 2024). The disruption from the conflict in Mali exacerbates challenges faced by herders already suffering from climate change in the Sahel region and reduced resource capacity.

Figure 11. Average large ruminants' ownership among the newly arrived Malian refugees

About one-third of the newly arrived Malian refugees report their households own small ruminants (goats, sheep, etc.), while only 11% own large ruminants (oxen, cows, or camel). Notably, those owning small ruminants are just as likely to live in a tent or be homeless (80%) while those owning large ruminants are only slightly less likely (74%). Refugees owning ruminants had a slightly higher likelihood of owning a mobile phone - 8% - versus the overall average of 6%. Households that own large or small ruminants have a slightly larger household size of an average of 6 persons versus 5 persons, which is the overall population mean.

This is the first estimate of the number of ruminants owned by the new arrivals, providing a critical new figure to help assess the needs of newly arrived refugees. Another report notes that four out of five families who own animals and undertake the seasonal transhumance border crossings also move with their families (79%; IOM, 2024). This highlights the specific needs of Malian refugee households who own herds, and their eventual need for mobile access to essential services like education, health, and water and sanitation.

Figure 12. Average small ruminants' ownership among the newly arrived Malian refugees

We tested the relationship between animal ownership and mobile phone ownership and housing type. Notably, owning animals has limited impact on phone ownership or housing type, indicating that animal ownership, at least in these two areas, does not significantly change refugees' profile.

Conclusion

This analysis makes use of existing socio-economic data collected by UNHCR and WFP to generate a rapid needs assessment to allow the Government of Mauritania, supported by development and humanitarian actors, to respond quickly to the fast-changing humanitarian crisis. Responses to new crises in fragile settings are frequently hindered by lack of timely robust analysis. The volatile security situation in the region has significantly increased those being forcibly displaced from Mali, effectively doubling the number of Malian refugees in Mauritania since 2023 – when some 118,722 additional Malian refugees arrived – bringing the total population to 233,240 as of July 2024. Refugees are arriving with significant pressing needs with nearly one in five children reporting they (19%) live alone with no adult present, four out of ten refugee households headed by women, and precarious housing conditions, with more than four out of five households living in tents (64%) or homeless (18%).

The analysis quantifies for the first time the disproportionate size of the refugee community in certain departments compared to the host community and thus informs the differentiated needs for increased basic needs and services across communities. The department of Bassiknou is the most affected. It now hosts twice its population in Malian refugees where previously the refugee population accounted for an additional 0.7 times the host population. This over 200% growth in refugees in 2023 in Bassiknou marks a rapid shift in basic needs and services that if not addressed will create strain on an already challenged service delivery system. As the majority of recently arrived Malian refugees live out-of-camp in remote areas, quantifying the numbers and needs of newly arrived refugees is essential to enable the Government of Mauritania to achieve their pledges of inclusion into basic services and social protection programmes. Further, Bassiknou is home to the Mbera refugee camp which the Government of Mauritania has committed to transform into a sustainable human settlement. This original analysis is the first to quantify the basic needs and services demand increase because of the rapid new influx of refugees. It is an important step towards modelling the demand for health, education, housing, social protection, water (among other services) that are required to stave off a secondary crisis for families fleeing war and violence and sustain an immediate minimum level of subsistence post-conflict.

The socio-economic assessment highlights the extreme vulnerability of the newly arrived Malian refugees and underlines the potential for future crises among the population if basic needs and services gaps are not filled shortly. The principal source of revenue reveals significant fragility among the newly arrived Malians. Nearly 100% work in the informal market, with one in three reporting that they cannot provide for themselves and resort

to borrowing money, begging or receiving gifts from others as their primary revenue modality. Another third of the population report working as day labourers or in small-scale commerce, while the remaining third either sell firewood or livestock-related products. The dependency ratio is elevated, with an average of 3.6 over the total newly arrived Malian population. Notably, the dependency ratio is not statistically different by arrival date, suggesting that high dependency rates persist well into the first year after arrival. A significant portion of the households lack access to safe drinking water, with 34% saying they drink from unprotected wells. Mobile phone ownership is overall low, with only 6% of households reporting owning a mobile phone.

It will be important for peaceful coexistence across both host and refugee communities, and to limit competition for scarce food and water resources, that the Government of Mauritania, supported by humanitarian and development partners, ensure adequate water and food stock is available for both community's animals. While a third of individuals own either small or large ruminants, the average number of animals reported owned per household is relatively small indicating that most newly arrived Malians have small herds. The median number of large ruminants (e.g. oxen, cows, camels) is 4 with a quarter owning 6 and for small ruminants (e.g. goats, sheep) the median is 4 with a quarter owning 10. Normally, both Malians and Mauritanian pastoralists cross into Mali during the winter months as part of the transhumance movement in search of food and water. However, this past winter, IOM reported that due to the fighting in Mali and the associated insecurity, many pastoralists did not undertake the regular movement into Mali, which increased pressure on pastoral resources in Mauritania, particularly in Bassiknou and Adel Bagrou.

A deeper understanding of the specific needs of herder families (both refugees and hosts) and impact of the conflict on traditional transhumance movement is critical to ensuring appropriate services are available for families, including in education and health and livestock veterinary services. Evidence to date suggests that it is common practice for families who own animals and undertake the seasonal transhumance border crossings to move with their families—79% of those surveyed in an IOM 2024 report. This highlights the need for adaptive services that may need to be mobile so as to ensure children can sustain education and basic health services for both animals and people are available on migratory routes.

This brief is an essential first step to providing the necessary evidence to inform the Government of Mauritania led response, supported by humanitarian and development partners, necessary to tailor programming to meet the specific vulnerabilities of the rapidly shifting population. The assessment highlights several areas that need more attention. There is a disproportionately high level of household heads designated as handicapped – one out of every ten households. To understand better the disabilities faced by the new arrivals from Mali, it is recommended to carry-out further data collection to measure disability using the Washington Group Set on of six questions on functioning more commonly used in censuses and surveys. The basic needs and demand for services for hosts is also evolving because of the new influx. As a result, it is recommended that the inclusion of Malian refugees into the upcoming 2024/25 national poverty assessment (*Enquête Permanente sur les conditions de vie des ménages (EPCV)*), is a necessary step to deepen the understanding of relative poverty compared to hosts and identify specific vulnerabilities faced by Malian refugees.

More detailed understanding of the disproportionate impact of the crisis on women and children across both refugees and host communities is needed over time. On average four out of every ten households are headed by women. The newly arrived refugees from Mali, similar to other forcibly displaced populations, tend to have women and children precede other family members when leaving their home country. Some 91% of households have at least one child aged 17 or younger. A detailed comparison across hosts and nationals in the upcoming 2024/25 national poverty assessment (EPCV) will help complete the detailed description of the disproportionate impact on women of the displacement crisis. Further the planned inclusion by the Government of Mauritania's National Statistics Office (ANSADE) supported by UNHCR and the World Bank of refugees into two-quarters of the 2025 national labour force survey will be an important step to mapping employment outcomes for both

Malian and Mauritanian households over time necessary to design inclusive labour market development support programmes.

This brief represents the first attempt to understand the socio-economic profile of the newly arrived Malian refugees in Mauritania since 2023 and reveals significant differences in family composition, animal ownership, and housing type by location. The diverse needs of the newly arrived Malian refugees, together with those of the existing refugees and the local populations, must be examined to help the Government of Mauritania achieve its goal of including refugees in national basic services and social protection programmes, as well as transforming Mbera camp into a sustainable human settlement. **This work is an example of an expanded collaboration across development and humanitarian partners in Mauritania, and our ability to partner in timely robust analysis needed to inform a joint response to forced displacement.**⁶

Acknowledgements

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Cover photo: Malian refugees in Mbera Camp in the Hodh Chargui region of Mauritania, near the border with Mali. © UNHCR/Xavier Bourgois

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⁶ This partnership has been enhanced by the joint investment in the [UNHCR World Bank Joint Data Center](#).

⁷ This policy brief is a contribution from a staff member of the World Bank though its data, analyses and conclusion do not represent the views of the World Bank, its West Africa department, its staff or its Board of Directors.

Understanding the socio-economic profile of refugee arrivals in Mauritania since 2023

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October 2024