

# MAURITANIA (Country Case Study)

[Mauritania]

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## A. Background

### 1. Which UNCT members have collaborated on this case study?

- Eight UN entities including Agencies, Funds and Programmes collaborated on this case-study. The following UNCT members have been instrumental in developing the case-study: OCHCH, ILO, IOM, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF and UNODC.
- UNCT senior leadership including the RC and Heads of agencies provided insightful guidance towards selecting the case-study, its approach as well as the content.
- The Resident Coordinator Office (RCO) provided facilitation services. UNDP's National Economist in charge of SDGs Platform portfolio, assisted the Peace and Development Adviser (PDA) in coordinating this case-study

### 2. Which national partners (governmental and non-governmental) were involved in developing this case study and how?

The following National partners have been contacted for data collection or being informed on this case-study. These local stakeholders are collaborating in the field to deal with both peace and development related issues. The ongoing self-organizing dynamics village committees created with local authorities in Bassikounou (Mauritania's eastern border with Mali), have been serving as useful networks for both National governmental bodies and international partners.

- **Local authorities of Bassikounou:** Mohamed Yislem Ould Bouh, Hakem (Prefect) – Tel. +222 44451007; Cheikne, Mayor of Bassikounou – Tel. +222 36695248; Adboulah Ould Sidi, Mayor of Megve – Tel. +222 41004111; Chief of Gendarmerie, Mousa – Tel. +222 46442594 and Police Commissioner, Ibrahim – Tel. +222 22046532
- **Villages committees / Civil society representatives:** El Boukhary Ould Abdaty, president village committee of Seredouba – Tel. +222 37138674; Mme Izzi Mint Cheick Sidi, president village committee of Mbere 1 – Tel. +222 20298246; Vatme Mint Mohamed El Abd, Representative of Women Association – Tel. +222 36271697; Mohamed Ould Deh, Youth Networks Focal point – Tel. +222 36665575
- **Local NGOs:** (Community liaison partners & services providers)
- **ADICOR** (*Appui au Développement Intégré des Communautés Rurales*) ; Tel: +22222486554 / 46486554 ; [adicorhodhs@gmail.com](mailto:adicorhodhs@gmail.com). ADICOR is a UNICEF partner in M'berra camp and within host communities to ensure that local initiatives such as the Central Child Protection Network; the Parent Teachers Association, Sheiks of Mahadras or Koranic schools, religious leaders... are actively participating in the promotion and protection of children's rights. This includes the identification of vulnerable children exposed or victims of violence, abuse and exploitation and their reference to integrated and multi-sectoral services (social work, health, education, birth registration, etc.).
- **AMPF** (*Association Mauritanienne pour la Promotion de la Famille*) ; Tel. +22236394773 / 22117032 / 46479364; [ampfrim@yahoo.fr](mailto:ampfrim@yahoo.fr) ; [elmamelkheir@yahoo.fr](mailto:elmamelkheir@yahoo.fr). AMPF is a UNFPA partner working on preventing and managing gender-based violence. The NGO operates in close collaboration with village committees through women and youth networks. AMPF serves both host communities and refugee to reduce gender-based violence.

- SOS Desert / Zeidane Ould Tfei; [zeidane@hotmail.com](mailto:zeidane@hotmail.com); Tel: (+222) 46459265. National NGO, partner of UNHCR, founded by Mauritians willing to put their skills and experiences at the service of the protection of the environment and respect for nature. It aims at enhancing the potential of the natural environment and preserving people's way of life to ensure their access to natural resources. The NGO works in Bassikounou to assist to refugees and Mauritanian communities implementing income-generating activities; strengthening the coexistence between the two communities; safeguarding the environment and fostering the rational management of natural resources (water - pastures);

### 3. Does the case study illustrate one or several phases or levels?

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Adapting SDG 16 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Implementing SDG 16 | <input type="checkbox"/> Monitoring & Reporting on SDG 16 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> National level             | <input type="checkbox"/> Regional level                 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Local level           |

## B. Case Study

### OPTION 1 (pre-structured)

#### 4. Country context for the achievement of SDG 16

Hodh el Chargui is the Southeastern region in Mauritania, about 1200 kilometers from the capital, Nouakchott. The landscape is desertic; rain and pasture have become scarcer over the last decade due to climate change. Thus, the surviving cows, sheep, goats, donkeys and camels represent the livelihoods of the mostly nomadic communities in the region. Like in many parts of the Sahel, bordering areas are vulnerable. Hodh el Chargui is bordering on Mali which is facing a multidimensional crisis (inter-ethnic conflicts, terrorism, transnational organized crime, climate change). The region is one of the most vulnerable regions in the country facing an important deficit of basic services and infrastructures. Communities there are also impacted by a refugee outflow from the Malian conflict. Moreover, the local communities have been impacted by the humanitarian crisis in Mali. Since 2012, they have been hosting more than 50,000 Malian refugees, larger than the population of Bassikounou.

This situation is fueling tensions between host communities and refugees; as well as within local communities, mainly over basic social services and natural resources. The presence of refugees contributed to increase basic goods prices in the region. Banditry is also generating mistrust and compromise relationships between host communities and refugees. National authorities in liaison with local populations are collaborating to provide security and essential public services including basic social services with the support of their partners. Despite the challenges, local communities are organizing themselves to sustain peace through participation in local governance mechanisms, promotion of the rule of law and human rights. Thus, protection of civilians including children and women, reduction of all forms of violence and exploitation; and inclusive decision-making processes are priorities for local communities in the region of Hodh el Chargui.

For instance, this region has the worst child rights indicators in Mauritania: 57% of girls between 0-14 years have been subjected to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), 40.3% women aged 20-49 years were married before 18 years old, only 43.7% children aged 0-5 years are registered at birth and 83.1% of children aged 1-14 years are subjected to violent discipline<sup>1</sup>. More efforts are therefore required to reach the SDG 16 targets. More efforts are therefore required to reach the SDG 16 targets.

In line with this context, local populations have been developing their resilience capacities to respond to both internal and external factors threatening their security, fundamental human rights and their livelihoods, through the village committees and with the support of UNCT and their national partners in the form of infrastructure projects in refugee hosting communities in support of their livelihood and the management of natural resources, as well as vocational training and income-generating activities both in favor of Mauritanian communities and refugees in the area.

Village committees are instrumental in the self-governance of local population in Hodh el Chargui. The committees are involved in identifying, formulating and defending communities needs in terms of security and protection as well as human rights and resilience capacities development through social cohesion and local economic development. Local populations recognize these committees as their representatives. In this regard, members of the village committees are

<sup>1</sup> MICS 2015

directly in touch with local authorities to deal with ongoing security, peace and right-related issues. The committees have kept demonstrating their inclusiveness with a broad participation of local population and representation of minorities and gender balance. Their membership includes women, religious leaders, young people, migrants, disabled persons, marginalized people and refugees.

The committees are increasingly involved in preventing conflicts between refugees and local population, in the protection of women and children, especially against exploitation and the prevention of harmful traditional practices, and in preventing and curbing crime by collaborating with security forces deployed in the region. Recognizing the important role of the village committees for promoting peace and justice, UNCT have been sensitizing and training the committees in conflict prevention, gender-based violence, sustainable management of natural resources, etc. This support needs to be reinforced to enable village committees to extensively contribute in achieving Goal 16.

## **5. Efforts to achieve SDG 16**

Have formed committees through a process of “democratic election” undertaken in liaison with local authorities. A general assembly oversaw the vote and consensually endorsed the election of village committees composed of 11 to 19 members in which all social classes (women, girls, young people, migrants, religious, minorities, refugees, etc.) are represented. Currently, 49 committees have been elected by the general assembly of the village for a renewable period of one year. The committees ensure that each villager can be heard, that natural resources are well managed, that the needs of the village, for example in basic social services, are well identified and transmitted to the authorities; humanitarian and development partners; and that peaceful coexistence with refugees is maintained.

The village committees through their self-governance mechanisms including inclusive approaches and decision-making processes, play a key role in reducing violence in all its forms through sensitization of local communities, urgent mediation, early warning and liaison with local authorities, police, gendarmerie and judicial services (Target 16.1). The main women and young people networks in the regional of Hodh el Chargui are members of the committees; and they provide continuing advocacy efforts towards the protection of women and children against abuse and exploitation (16.2). In addition, the committees are aware of the state institutions involved in the protection of civilian and they use these established mechanisms to alert and/or collaborate in preventing or solving ongoing issues. Their efforts are also increasingly rooted in a right-based perspective (16.3).

This self-governance dynamic of local communities in fragile situations, is sensitive to perceptions of exclusion. Thus, it incorporates principles of accountability and participation. The framework involves the most vulnerable people as well as refugees through an inclusive approach and capacity building in terms of institutional governance (16.6; and 16.7); and 16.10), respectively. Village committees actively contribute to local authorities’ efforts to prevent all forms of exploitation, human rights violations and violent conflicts; as well as effective and transparent functioning of local public institutions. The village committees also play an instrumental role in the roll out of the registration of refugees living out of Mbera camp, ensuring messages on refugee registration and protection are communicated as widely as possible. This registration exercise will ultimately ensure that all refugee children born in Mauritania receive birth certificates issued by the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (16.9).

The Central Child Protection Network serves as a forum where community members meet to discuss protection problems faced by refugee children and research solutions. It is thus an informal community structure, representing all sectors in Mbera refugee camp who have a role to play in promoting children’s rights. The Central Child Protection Network is also a vital means of conducting awareness-raising sessions on child rights issues amongst community members and for supporting the delivery of services, including identification of vulnerable refugee children and their referral to basic services (health, education, birth registration, social work, etc.). It also serves as platforms for holding duty-bearers, including families accountable for promoting child rights and protecting children from violence. The inclusion of religious and local leaders is important and gives legitimacy to their work. Village committees are playing a critical role in this dynamic by facilitating contact, alerting on grievances, and sensitizing local populations.

## 6. Results so far and Way Forward

The village committees are contributing to defuse tensions and prevent conflicts by bridging the refugees to the host communities. The village committees also interact with the Mbera refugee camp committee for the management of conflicts in case of tensions between refugees living at the camp and the local people in villages around. This self-governance initiative through village committees in Hodh el Chargui is increasingly instrumental in reducing violence and protecting children and women against abuses and all forms of violence, while enhancing refugee representation in the villages where they have settled.

The role played by the village committees in close cooperation with local authorities is also promoting human rights through the collaboration between these committees and security forces deployed in the region. This partnership might reinforce stability and rule of law. Participation in decision-making processes remain supportive for local institutions effectiveness and efficiency in responding to both peace and economic development challenges.

- Villagers have local mechanisms for conflict resolution and consultation for the peaceful management of natural resources. These mechanisms include all social categories, including refugees;
- Village committees have an interface with the Mbera refugee camp committee for the management of conflicts;
- Committees know how to identify their needs and prioritize them. They sensitize people on violence reduction; support local and regional authorities in promoting human security, and actively participate in conflict resolution by meeting regularly with members of other village committees to discuss the challenges posed by desertification and resource depletion;
- Villagers mapped vulnerable people within their community, including refugees, and know how to prioritize critical issues in resolving situations they face;
- Authorities; and humanitarian and development actors recognize the committees as important partner and involve them in any development and humanitarian intervention in the villages;
- Women in village committees make greater use of the platform and have the capacity to advocate for this space to solve daily problems, disputes; and for their empowerment by organizing themselves around income-generating activities;
- Security and peacebuilding are priorities for the villages.

The committees are main interlocutors in development planning and socioeconomic projects implementation. They are active in promoting local economic initiatives, which remain vital to peace and security; by regularly liaising with local authorities including state representatives and mayors. Committees' members involvement in local development coordination as well as local governance bodies in their capacity of key stakeholders are relevant in preventing inter-community conflicts and building confidence between authorities and citizens. For the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) and other development partners in Mauritania, village committees serve as gateways to local communities.

In host communities where village committees have been established, UNICEF and OHCHR, for instance, intend to appoint focal persons for child protection and human rights, respectively. UNHCR is using the village committees to roll out registration of refugees living out of the camp and ultimately ensure access to all refugee children born in Mauritania to birth certificates. They should be trained and supported to raise awareness of the importance of birth registration and protection. The committee's role in preventing radicalization and the expansion of terrorist and transnational criminal organizations should be further strengthened and studied for possible replication in other Sahel countries.

## 7. Lessons Learned

The self-governance that resulted into Villages committees requires continuing and relevant support to sustain the dynamic and reinforce local capacities for resilience and peacebuilding in the fragile situation of the Hodh el Chargui region. This support needs to be constant, particularly in terms of capacity building, to ensure that village committees have conceptual and practical tools that are appropriate to their context to continue their efforts for security and stability that rely in this context on violence reduction and protection, rule of law, management of natural resources and participation at all levels and in all community-driven activities.

Protection networks are strengthening awareness which require training and sensitisation to help households and communities to develop their capacity to address the protection concerns of children, women and minorities including refugees. However, capacity building of community-based mechanisms is long term process which cannot be properly addressed through emergency funding. Limited access to education and the prevailing social norms and cultural practices continue to put women, boys and girls, including refugee children at increased risks of protection. There is a need to strengthen the involvement of duty bearers. Furthermore, for their sustainability, the link between community-based mechanisms and formal systems needs to be reinforced.

The opportunity has been given to women to learn new knowledge and skills so that their contribution to the conflict prevention process is more structured and heard. Indeed, women remain underrepresented in traditional rural conflict management or bargaining mechanisms. The participation of women, girls and youth is a response to their frustration at not being considered in community decision-making processes, especially the decisions that affect them. Partners should continue to support this through projects aiming to strengthen the participation of women, girls and young people in conflict prevention and local development mechanisms.

Given the social constraints, it is still difficult for women to travel alone. it is thus necessary to find acceptable solutions for the villagers allowing women to attend events taking place outside the village. Innovative approaches, locally established and focused on the specificities of communities, could be initiated and consensually developed to limit or anticipate the harmful effects of certain practices that local populations would change.