

UNHCR Mauritania interventions in the environmental sector



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Context

For several years, **environmental management has been a national cause in Mauritania**, as the country suffers the effects of drought, desertification, deforestation, bush fires and the deterioration of its ecosystems, in addition to multiform pollution in its urban centres. The **pressure on land and natural resources** appears to be increasing, whether to meet livelihood needs, to provide firewood, for grazing land or for logging. Broadly speaking, controlling the deterioration and unsustainable exploitation of resources, air, water and ground pollution and desertification is a challenge the country will have to address if it is to maintain the balance of its ecosystems and improve the outlook for future generations.

Then add to this the **presence of a refugee camp, causing significant environmental impacts** in the host country, notably when the prolonged presence of displaced persons extends over time. The resulting environmental degradation has the potential to seriously exacerbate tensions between host populations and refugees. Based on this scenario, humanitarian organizations now include consideration of the environment and adaptation to climate change in their humanitarian response plans.

To that effect, **at the local level in the Hodh Chargui region, humanitarian actors are actively trying to reduce the pressure placed on various resources**, and wood in particular. With the support of UNHCR, a number of projects have been set up to promote environmental protection around villages close to the Mbera camp. These partner projects are being implemented, both in and around the camp, by SOS Désert, Action Contre la Faim-Spain, RET-Germany, Save the Children and the International Labour Office. To date, these actions have contributed to reforestation, upgrading of waste drainage areas and construction of infrastructure aimed at improving natural resource management. These various interventions encourage **peaceful coexistence** and social cohesion while contributing to the development of livelihoods.



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Responding to pressure on resources and encouraging regrowth: reforestation

Reforestation activities in the region have benefited from the specific support of UNHCR which, since 2016, in partnership with SOS Désert, has funded the **planting of over 58,832 plants in and around the camp¹**, of which 21,692 (40.3%) have survived from 2016 until 2020. This activity has been run jointly with the regional department in charge of environmental issues, which has selected species that require little water, such as **Acacia Senegalensis, Acacia Leneina, Egyptian Balsam, Ziziphus Mariri, Parkimso Men, Alfalfa, numerous fruiting species and Moringa**.

Furthermore, in 2020, in partnership with RET-Germany, **8,000 additional plants in Bassiknou Moughataa's four municipalities** (Bassiknou, Megve, Dhar, Fassala) have been planted as part of an initiative to set up **10 small and medium green enterprises**. Their progress is currently being monitored. The project aims to consolidate the progress made in environmental protection while enhancing agricultural production facilities. This has involved the establishment of protective mesh fencing and the planting of tree perimeters around 50 market gardens, as well as the construction of 10 water retention basins for agricultural use in 16 villages. In the same vein, producers have been supplied with production consumables and agricultural inputs, and a series of peer-to-peer trainings on horticultural production techniques was organized in 2020.

¹ 53,851 trees at the end of 2020 and 4981 trees were planted as of 29 September..

Lastly, **the moughataa village committees for joint management and for conflict management and prevention** have also been trained in environmental protection issues, as this has been one of the points of contention between the communities.

Waste recycling and environmental protection

Using a circular logic, a **latrine sludge recycling strategy** has been developed by UNHCR, in partnership with ACF-Spain. Since 2019, **the “1 emptied latrine = 1 hole = 1 tree” approach** has enabled refugees to contribute towards the environmental restoration of their host community. In 2019, the Volunteer Refugees for the Cleanliness of the Camp (VRCC) were trained in techniques for emptying and rehabilitating the camp’s permanent latrines. In 2020, they were trained in the recycling of latrine sludge for the purposes of reforestation, with the ultimate aim of creating an autonomous sanitation component in the Mbera camp. **More than 2,300 indigenous trees have been planted over 6 hectares²**, and the plantation has also been used **by women's groups for market gardening activities**. This has contributed to the **consolidation of their livelihoods** and to their empowerment.



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The employment of the local refugee workforce and the local population for the construction of sanitation facilities has encouraged a shared experience and has led to the training of a highly capable workforce. The recycling of latrine sludge for use in reforestation has allowed the refugees to contribute to the restoration of their host environment. UNHCR and its partners are currently conducting a **review of solid waste management practices**, which will ultimately lead to an ecological waste management strategy. This strategy will help to limit the environmental nuisance caused by the waste. The refugee and host populations will be encouraged to suggest their own waste management initiatives.

Resource conservation through community engagement in the fight against bush fires

As part of the drive towards empowerment that the Mbera camp is currently undergoing, the role and involvement of the refugees in project implementation processes is a key factor in the progressive and sustainable transfer of ownership of projects to their beneficiaries. In response to the issue of bush fires, which is becoming more acute every year, **refugee volunteer fire brigades** have been set up, equipped and trained by SOS Désert. In 2020 they responded to around **thirty bush fires** in the vicinity

² As of 29 September 2021.

of Mbera camp, in support of Mauritanian populations which were experiencing particularly severe bush fires that year.



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Furthermore, **100 kilometres of firebreak were created in 2020 by mixed volunteer groups (refugees and host population)**, in order to limit the spread of fires. These activities were accompanied by multi-level **awareness sessions**, run by UNHCR's protection partner, Save the Children, engaging some of the key actors (straw cutters, cart drivers, village chiefs, etc.) in a campaign to provide information on the causes of bush fires, on reducing the discrimination and stigmatization linked to these fires, and on fire prevention. Brush fire prevention and the practical response provided on the ground constitute a significant step towards achieving **coexistence and social**

cohesion.

Outlook

During the next few years, UNHCR envisages an **expansion of its environmental interventions on a number of levels.**

In order to capitalize on the reforestation experience, UNHCR anticipates the continuation of funding for SOS Désert, for the **creation of tree nurseries and the training of refugees in the protection of ecosystems.** Additionally, support is planned for the VRCC this year, in order to strengthen their sludge recycling capacities and to provide them with equipment with a view to **improving the procedures for removing waste and latrine sludge to off-camp processing or recycling sites.** 500 additional trees will be planted this year, using stabilized latrine sludge as compost.

Concerning bush fire response, UNHCR and its partners envisage, at the request of the Wali of the Hodh Chargui region, **the establishment of a community-wide fire prevention and surveillance mechanism**, using mixed local-refugee fire brigades, to raise awareness among the two communities about the harm caused by fires, working jointly to establish firebreaks around the worst-affected villages and to extinguish fires.

Finally, UNHCR is working in concert with its partners to support the further development of the **Great Green Wall** and to encourage its inclusion of the Mbera camp area, in order to contribute to environmental protection on a national and regional scale.