UNHCR interventions in the environment sector

Mauritania, 2021. Malian refugee women help green the Mbera camp as part of a reforestation project. UNHCR/Colin Delfosse.

Mauritania is a Sahelian country that has historically been affected by desertification and drought. Extreme temperatures and weather conditions associated with climate change have recently contributed to crop degradation and soil erosion, mainly located in the south of the country and the oasis areas. Rural households are finding it increasingly difficult to sustain their livelihoods in this context. In 2022, WFP estimated that more than 15 percent of Mauritanians would be food insecure, thus adding Mauritania to the list of hunger hotspots. The prolonged presence of refugees in Mbera camp in Hodh Chargui also increased pressure on the region's water, fuelwood and grazing resources, creating potential sources of tension between host communities and refugees.

Warming climate threatens livelihoods of Malian refugees and Mauritanians

The Mauritanian Government, as well as humanitarian and development actors, have made environmental preservation and regeneration a central element of their strategies and initiatives. Mauritania has in fact developed a National Strategy for the Environment and Sustainable Development. The refugee-hosting region of Hodh Chargui has in turn aligned its Regional Strategy for Accelerated Growth and Shared Prosperity (SCAPP/SCRAPP) with this national environmental strategy, with the 2030 objective being to slow down environmental degradation and reverse trends so that sound natural resources management underpins green and inclusive growth. In complementarity with the Government, the United Nations is working to strengthen the resilience of ecosystems, communities and national systems in Hodh Chargui.

UNHCR, for its part, is specifically focused on (1) preserving and restoring natural resources, (2) providing clean and renewable energy, (3) promoting sustainable sanitation and waste treatment solutions, and (4) promoting a green economy.

Preserving and restoring natural resources

Reforestation: Since 2016, UNHCR with the support of its partners such as SOS Desert (local NGO) and RET-Germany has planted 59,000 trees inside and outside the Mbera refugee camp. In achieving this result, 500 volunteers from the host and refugee communities were engaged and supported. Since 2021, and thanks to the support of the UN's Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), UNHCR has accelerated reforestation efforts and, in doing so, has deliberately involved local networks of women and youth.

- 59,000 trees planted in Mbera camp and nearby localities (Mbera 1 and 2, Samarassa, Libreini) between 2016 and 2022, including 24,000 trees in 2022.
- 500 volunteers (260 men, 240 women) mobilized in 2022

Preventing and managing bushfires: Established in 2018 by refugee volunteers with support from UNHCR, a local NGO and local authorities, the Mbera Fire Brigade has worked side by side with host communities to prevent and fight bushfires in and around the Mbera refugee camp. Since 2018, more than 125 fires have been extinguished by the brigade. At the same time, firebreaks stretching 800 kilometers have been built. Education campaigns have also been conducted to prevent bushfires.

- More than 125 fires extinguished by the Mbera Fire Brigade since 2018 (with an estimated area burned of more than 1500 km^2)
- More than 800 kilometers of firewalls built since 2020

Mauritania, 2022. Volunteers from the Fire Brigade and the local NGO SOS Désert next to the Mbera camp. UNHCR/Colin Delfosse.

In 2022, the Mbera Fire Brigade won the UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award for the Africa region. The award recognizes the Brigade's exceptional courage and dedication in fighting bushfires and protecting the environment, the refugees living in Mbera camp and the surrounding host population.

Providing clean and renewable energy

Access to clean and reliable energy for cooking: In 2022, UNHCR initiated several pilot projects in partnership with GIZ and UNDP to encourage households to use environmentally friendly cooking solutions that do not present health risks. At the moment, firewood is the primary source of energy for most refugee households, which can accelerate erosion and tension with host communities. As such, UNHCR and partners have introduced a "cash for gas" project. So far, 700 refugee households received as starter kit and cash to purchase gas (Liquid Petroleum Gas – LPG) for cooking. Efforts are also underway with refugees to produce biogas locally by recovering sludge.

- Around 700 refugee households received cash assistance for the purchase of gas cylinders (LPG)

Electrification via renewable energy: Under the World Bank's financing mechanism for refugees and host communities (IDA-18), the Mauritanian Government can proceed with the electrification of the Mbera camp and surrounding areas with the construction of a hybrid diesel-solar power plant in 2023. UNHCR is also shifting to solar energy in its offices and, with its partners, solarizing boreholes, health centers and potentially other services.

Mauritania, 2021. Andrew Harper, Special Advisor to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees on Climate Action, meets with Ndambele, a refugee and manager of the solar and water system in the Mbera refugee camp. UNHCR/Colin Delfosse

Sustainable sanitation and waste treatment solutions

Since 2019, UNHCR and its partner ACF-Spain have extracted latrine sludge for use in market gardens managed by women's group. Trees are also being planted around the camp using the latrine sludge for fertilizer.

- 500 refugees trained in latrine sludge extraction and reforestation
- 2,750 trees planted from 2020 to 2022
- 1.3 hectare gardens managed by women using latrine sludge as fertilizer

Promotion of green jobs

UNHCR, GIZ and ILO offer refugees and host communities training and entrepreneurship coaching on clean energy and environmental restoration.

- 1,800 individuals received technical training and support in market gardening between 2020 and 2022
- 100 refugee youth trained to install and maintain solar systems
- 50 refugees trained to maintain small biogas production units
- 80 income-generating activities and 10 small and medium green businesses in the 16 host community villages between 2018 and 2021

Perspectives 2022-2026

Main areas	Ongoing initiatives	Outlook by 2026
Preservation and restauration of natural resources	- Tree planting - Fire prevention and management	- 100,000 trees planted - Capacity of the Mbera Fire Brigade reinforced
Access to clean and renewable energy	- Education campaigns on clean energy - "Cash for Gas" Project - Biogas for domestic energy - Solarization of UNHCR infrastructure and services in Mbera camp	- 100% of households in Mbera use clean cooking energy - 100% of UNHCR infrastructure running on solar energy - Electrification of Mbera camp with a mix of solar and thermal energy
Sustainable sanitation and waste treatment solutions	- Latrine sludge extraction to fertilize tree planting and gardens - Recovery of solid and liquid waste - Construction of a rainwater evacuation system	- Improvement of the standards from 20 households per latrine to ten households per latrine - Reliable rainwater evacuation network installed - 80% of solid waste recycled - Capacity of Refugee Volunteers Cleaning the Camp (RVCC) reinforced
Promotion of green jobs	- Market gardening - Training of young people in green industries and eco-friendly construction	- Surface area and productivity of market gardening increased - Training of 1,000 women and men in advanced market gardening techniques - Training of 2,000 young people in renewable energy and eco-friendly construction