# Refugee Inclusion in the Mauritanian Education System

## Context

Since the crisis in Mali, Mauritania has hosted more than 288,000 refugees and asylum seekers (of whom 162,000 refugees and asylum seekers are registered), mainly in the Mbera camp and in urban areas. Children make up 54% of this population. Mauritania's political and institutional framework is particularly favorable to the inclusion of refugees.

The country has ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and is committed to ensuring refugees' access to public services, including education. These commitments were reinforced at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2023, where Mauritania pledged to include refugees into the national education system, affirming its commitment and willingness to provide comprehensive support and opportunities to displaced populations: Include refugees in the national education system and ensure their effective access to public schools
(GRF-07989), including the following:

- Include 100% of refugees in the information system for administrative reform and education management (SIRAGE) by 20241.
- Gradually integrate schools in the Mbera camp into the national education system. It is planned that by 2027, the last Malian and the first Mauritanian first-cycle school-leaving certificate will be issued in the camp. With the support of the UN Gender Accelerator, study the possibility of developing social safety net programs to promote access and retention of girls (refugees and host community) in school, with a particular focus on secondary education.

Aligned with the **National Education Sector Development Program (PNDSE III)**, which promotes the inclusion of refugees in the national education system, the government will ensure that refugees have effective access to public schools. This includes their inclusion into the information system for administrative reform and education management (SIRAGE), as well as the gradual transition from the Malian curriculum to the Mauritanian curriculum at
the Mbera camp by 2027 for the primary cycle.

To support these reforms, a 10-year **Budgeted Action Plan (BAP)** was elaborated to adapt to the implementation schedule of these reforms, while supporting the transition of refugees in the Mbera camp into the Mauritanian education system. It also includes measures for refugees outside the camp, in urban areas, and host communities, aimed at strengthening access, quality and educational governance, while promoting social cohesion in the Hodh Chargui region.

1 The data collection process is ongoing and the data will be entered into the platform when the data collection process is completed.

Furthermore, to operationalise the BAP, a Three-year Roadmap for Inclusion of Refugees in the National Education System was developed by UNHCR, in collaboration with UNESCO and the **Ministry of Education and Reform of the Education System (Ministère de l'Éducation et la Réforme du Système d'Enseignement, MERSE)**, to facilitate the operationalisation of the Mauritanian government's pledge on education. In early 2025, the MERSE reinforced this commitment by issuing a circular instructing municipalities nationwide to guarantee refugee access to national schools.

## Access to education for refugees living in urban areas

In Mauritania, refugee and asylum-seeking children living in urban areas are integrated into national schools, both public and private. In collaboration with our partner, especially with the NGO RET-International, UNHCR facilitates their access to education through various activities, including community mobilisation, awareness- raising and the acquisition of school kits. Our advocacy efforts with the MERSE have significantly improved the number of children enrolled in urban schools, mainly in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott. Currently, 1,638 pupils are registered, with an enrolment rate of 55% at primary level and 29% at secondary level.

| Grade | School-age population | | | School enrolment | | | Gross enrolment rate | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | T |
| Pre-school (3-5 years) | 800 | 788 | 1588 | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Primary (6-11 years) | 1152 | 1175 | 2327 | 681 | 606 | 1287 | 59% | 52% | 55% |
| Secondary (12-17 years) | 565 | 643 | 1208 | 159 | 192 | 351 | 28% | 30% | 29% |
| Total | 2517 | 2606 | 5123 | 840 | 798 | 1638 | | | |

*Figure 1 - Situation of refugee children living in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou as of June 30 (2023-2024)*

## Access to education at the Mbera camp

Education in the Mbera camp follows the Malian curriculum, reinforced by two Arabic subjects (Arabic language and religious instruction), under the supervision of the MERSE through the Regional Director of National Education and the Divisional Inspector of National Education of Bassikounou. UNHCR and UNICEF coordinate the education sector in collaboration with the refugees and other members of the Education Working Group. The camp has 22 pre-schools, 8 primary schools, 2 secondary schools, a connectivity center and a library. There are 195 educational staff, the majority of whom are refugees. Partner NGOs work with community structures to mobilize and sensitize parents. School meals are provided by the WFP, helping to keep pupils in class. Currently, the camp has a Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) of 38% at primary level and 6% at secondary level.

| Grade | School-age population | | | School enrolment | | | Gross enrolment rate | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | T |
| Pre-school (3-5 years) | 5049 | 5233 | 10282 | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Primary (6-11 years) | 9956 | 10470 | 20426 | 4081 | 3773 | 1287 | 41% | 36% | 38% |
| Secondary (12-17 years) | 7461 | 7964 | 15425 | 580 | 318 | 898 | 8% | 4% | 6% |
| Total | 22466 | 23667 | 46133 | 4661 | 4091 | 8752 | | | |

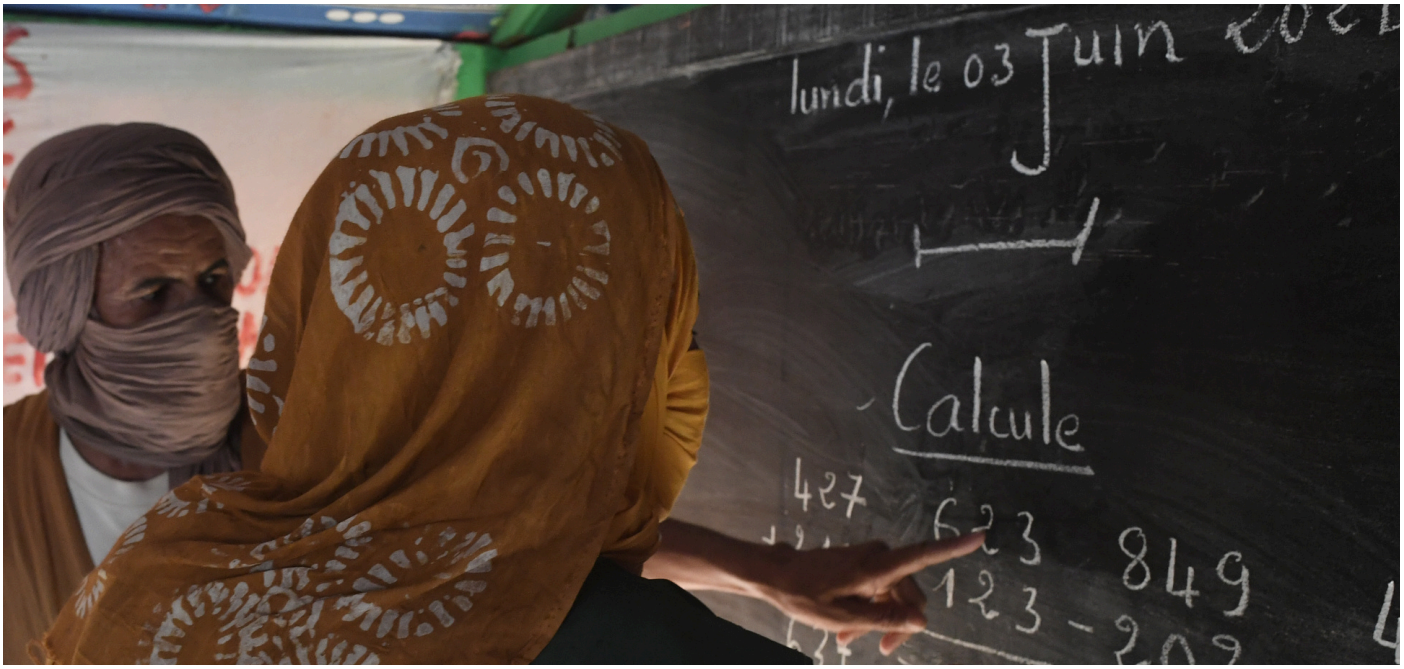
*Figure 2 - Situation of refugee children in the Mbera camp as of June 30 (2023-2024)*

In 2024, UNHCR and RET International conducted a holistic study to measure learning outcomes for forcibly displaced children in Mauritania, focusing on both the Mbera refugee camp and the host community of Fassala 2.

**The Holistic Assessment of Learning and Development Outcomes (HALDO)** revealed significant differences between student backgrounds: Mbera camp students were generally older for their grade, less likely to speak Hasania, and more exposed to French in the classroom compared to their host community peers.

Assessment results showed that most students in both settings struggled with foundational literacy and numeracy, with around 80% of grade 4 and 50% of grade 6 students not reaching the reading comprehension section, and similar gaps in numeracy performance. Socioemotional learning and executive functioning scores were high on basic tasks but declined as difficulty increased. Notably, few background variables-including socioeconomic status-predicted student performance, though grade 6 students consistently outperformed grade 4 peers, indicating some learning progression. Focus group discussions highlighted positive attitudes toward schooling but underscored persistent challenges such as resource shortages, overcrowded classrooms, and limited support for children with disabilities. Addressing these deficits is essential to improve educational outcomes and ensure schools effectively serve both refugee and host community children.

## Access to education for new arrivals outside the camp




As part of the emergency response, considerableefforts have gone into mapping the needs in theHodh Chargui region for the inclusion of refugeesin schools, as well as organising reintegrationcourses for newly arrived pupils. As of December2024, 929 refugee pupils (442 boys and 487 girls)are already enrolled in out-of-camp primaryschools, representing a rate of 52.2% based on theprimary-age population registered in July 2024.The forthcoming launch of the new response plan, together with the circular recently issued by the MERSE reaffirming the authorisation of the acceptance and enrolment of all refugee children in the country's schoolson an equal footing with Mauritanian pupils, should contribute to a significant improvement in this rate.

## Tertiary education and vocational training

The DAFI program was launched in Mauritania in 2008, following the voluntary repatriation of Mauritanianr efugees from Senegal, providing assistance to about 60 students in accessing higher education until 2015. From2016, in response to the changing profile of forcibly displaced populations in the country, priority was given to Malian refugees in the Mbera camp, as well as to other nationalities in urban areas (Syria, Central AfricanRepublic, Iraq, etc.).

To date, the DAFI program has supported 253 students, including 57 girls (22.5%) and 195boys (77.5%). The scholarship covers tuition fees, study materials, food, transport, accommodation and otherexpenses, as well as insurance and medical care. As far as the technical and vocational training is concerned, theInternational Labor Office (ILO) continues to offer training to young refugees and members of the hostcommunity at the Mbera camp training center. In 2024, the center trained 193 young trainees in various fields under the supervision of 18 trainers. In urban areas, constant efforts were made within the framework of the partnership between UNHCR and the national employment agency (Techghil).

## PERSEPECTIVE 2025

Mauritania provides a favorable environment for refugee inclusion, as seen in health and social protection, and is extending this approach to national education with strong institutional and community support. Refugees in urban areas already experience de facto inclusion, though challenges remain, such as limited access to examination platforms and lack of integration into the education information system (SIGE). Incorporating refugees into Mauritania's national education system aligns with the country's 'nexus' approach, aiming to strengthen education quality for both refugees and host communities, particularly in Hodh Chargui. This supports UNHCR's global strategy and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) for inclusive, quality education. The transition involves gradually shifting from the Malian to the Mauritanian curriculum, with all new students following the national curriculum from 2025 and full harmonization targeted by 2035, emphasizing Arabic language skills.

Key objectives include equitable access for all children, harmonised educational standards, improved teaching quality, and sustainable, locally owned initiatives. Building on Mauritania's 2023 GRF pledge, UNHCR and the MERSE are implementing a three-year roadmap to operationalize refugee inclusion, supported by a ministerial circular issued in January 2025. Effective inclusion requires collaborative planning, strengthened systems, and support from technical and financial partners. Tailored approaches are needed for diverse refugee situations, including curriculum recognition for possible returns and language support, especially in the Mbera camp. Deployment of additional teachers and enhanced local capacity in Hodh Chargui remain priorities.

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