



**UNHCR**

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés



# Participatory Assessment Report 2019

UNHCR Nouakchott  
March 2019





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# 1. Methodology

## 1.1 Theme

Self-reliance is defined as the ability of an individual, household or community to meet essential needs and to enjoy social and economic rights in a sustainable manner and with dignity. This participatory assessment focused on livelihoods and self-reliance of urban refugees and asylum-seekers in Mauritania. The assessment covered a range of issues, including access to vocational training, tertiary education, formal and informal employment.

## 1.2 Objectives

The objectives of this participatory assessment were to identify protection risks among refugee communities; identify the causes of these risks, but also the capacities and resources within the communities and the corresponding public services available locally. This exercise was an opportunity to discuss with both refugee communities and service providers about the challenges, priorities and the local solutions available to them, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) which articulates the importance of refugees' access to jobs and livelihoods to enable them to meet their needs and contribute to the local economy while preparing for their future whether they return home, integrate in the country of asylum, or resettle in a third country.

This qualitative exercise falls within UNHCR Mauritania's plan to gather more data on the socio-economic situation of PoCs, in view of developing evidence and market-based interventions to facilitate the economic inclusion of urban persons of concern (PoCs). A socio-economic assessment has been planned for the second quarter of 2019, to gather quantitative and qualitative data on assets, income level, education, work experience and capacities, as well as on the interest and motivation of refugees to find employment or create self-employment opportunities, including factors that hinder participation in certain areas of work. A market study is to be conducted in the last quarter of 2019.

## 1.3 Methods and target groups

Multi-functional teams composed of UNHCR and partners (ALPD, ONG Actions, Djikke) participated in the design and implementation of the participatory assessment. Four complementary methods were used during the exercise conducted during the first two weeks of March 2019:

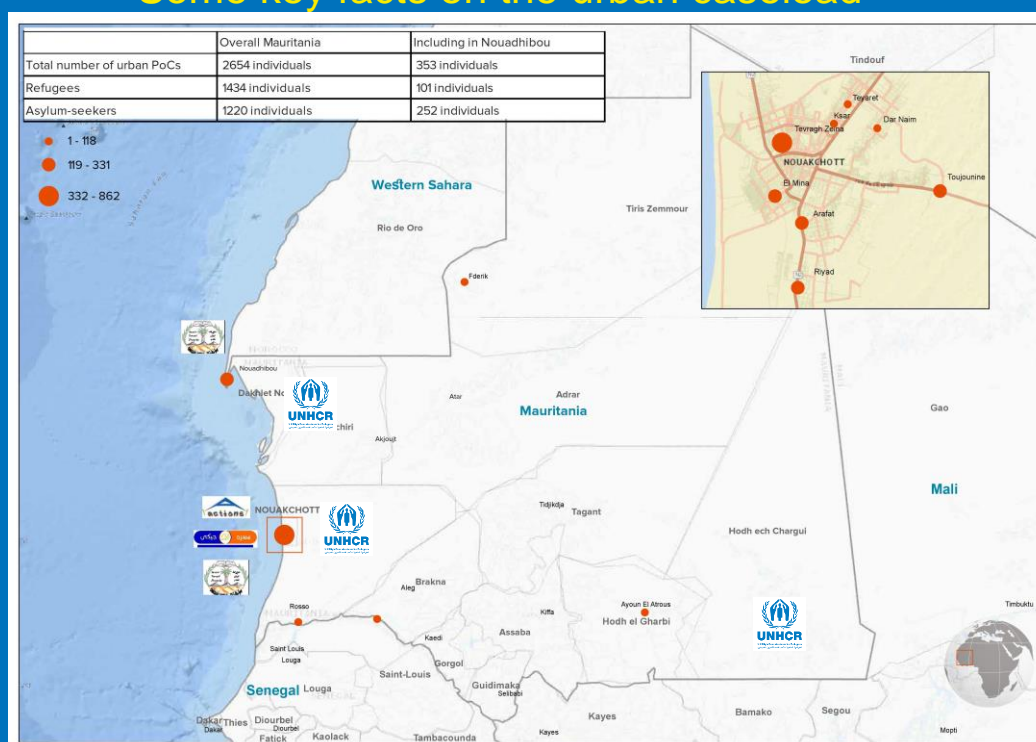
1. **A desk review using data from UNHCR database proGres** to conduct a review of working-age PoCs and their profiles in terms of education and occupation, using age, gender, diversity, location, and nationality variables. All urban PoCs aged from 18 to 55 registered as of 1 March 2019 were targeted for this review.
2. **20 focus group discussions** with a total of 210 refugees and asylum-seekers were organized in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott (Sebkha and Tevragh Zeina neighborhoods). These groups were composed of: Male youth (4 groups); Female youth (2 groups); Adult men (6 groups); Adult women (4 groups), with youth aged between 17 to 24 years old, and adults from 25 to 55 years old. Additional groups discussions were conducted with refugee leaders (1 group), LGBTI refugees (1 group), and graduates from DAFI and ILO learning programmes (1 group), and a mixed group in Nouadhibou.
3. **12 interviews with key informants** from various Units and Directorates of the Ministry of Vocational training, Labour, Employment and Modernization of the Administration (MFPTEMA), the national agency

for youth employment and job placement (ANAPEJ), the national agency for vocational and technical training (INAPFT), the Guichet Unique (national agency in charge of supporting the creation of enterprises), the national social security agency (CNSS), and the Chamber of commerce.

4. **18 workplace visits where PoCs are employed**, when agreed by them, to see their working conditions and discuss conditions of employment with their employers. In addition, 3 interviews were conducted at the partner office (ALPD) for PoCs who refused to be visited at their workplace.

#### 1.4 Context and population of concern as of March 2019 for urban areas

### Some key facts on the urban caseload



- 54% of individuals are **recognized refugees**;
- **Males** make the majority of the population (59%);
- **44 different nationalities**, with top 3 refugee nationalities being Central African Republic (CAR), Syria, and Ivory Coast;
- PoCs are mainly located in the **urban centers** of Nouakchott (88%) and Nouadhibou (11%).
- In Nouakchott, PoCs live in the **neighborhoods** of Tevragh Zeina (38%), Sebkhah (14%), Arafat (10%), Toujounine (9%), Riyadh (8%), and El Mina (8%).
  - **Syrian PoCs**, live mostly in Tevragh Zeina (78%) and Ksar (11%).
  - **CAR PoCs** are more scattered in the peripheric neighbourhoods of Toujounine (26%), Arafat (20%), Sebkhah (15%) and Riyadh (13%).
  - **Ivoirian PoCs** are split between Nouakchott (82%) and Nouadhibou (18%). In Nouakchott, they mostly live in Tevragh Zeina (34%), Sebkhah (17%), and El Mina (16%).
- **40% of PoCs** have been living in Mauritania for more than 3 years.
- **A large variety of socio-economic profiles** among refugees, mainly students, cooks, merchants, workers in construction, domestic helpers, but also qualified ones including medical and teaching professionals.
- 41% of 18-55 year old PoCs have only (partially) completed **primary education**.

## 2. Key findings

### 2.1 Serious impact of displacement on refugees' access to learning, training opportunities and employment

#### ○ *Drop in learning and working activities*

In Mauritania, there is a wide variety of education profiles among PoCs aged 18-55, with 20% having received no formal education (18% among males and 23% among females), and 23% having reached university (25% among males and 19% among females). These rates vary greatly depending on communities, with only 10% of nationals of Central African Republic and Senegal reaching tertiary education.

In terms of the impact of displacement on refugee enrolment in learning opportunities, there is a severe drop between the situation in their respective countries of origin (CoO) and in Mauritania. Overall figures for male and female PoCs aged 18-55 indicate that 29% of the adults (18-55 years old) were students in CoO, while only 17% are students in Mauritania.

As for access to work, overall figures for 18-55 years old PoCs indicate that around 40-45% are not engaged in income generating activities (no occupation, students and housewives) in Mauritania. With the displacement, the rate of PoCs without any occupation increased from 16% to 25%.

Communities and gender are affected differently, with a more pronounced impact for men, 12% of whom were without a job in CoO rising to 25% in Mauritania. Displacement did not substantially impact the rate of women working as shown below.

| Top occupations for female POCs     | Countries of Origin | Mauritania |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|------------|
| No occupation                       | 23%                 | 25%        |
| Student                             | 24%                 | 14%        |
| Housekeepers (including housewives) | 15%                 | 21%        |

Of note, the category 'housekeeper' is accounted for as an occupation, while most women in this category would be housewives with no livelihood activities. The total rate of PoC women without income generating activities in Mauritania would thus be closer to 50%.

Among women, there are also disparities depending on communities. Only 8% of Syrian women were working in their country of origin and this trend remains similar in the country of asylum. However, more than 25% of CAR women were working in CoO increasing to 30% in Mauritania. This could partly be explained by their respective family compositions, with CAR women often being heads of households and breadwinners and thus needing to engage in livelihood activities in the country of asylum to support themselves, which is not the case of most Syrian households.

Finally, in terms of socio-economic mobility, the majority of skilled refugees have less access to the labour market in Mauritania. For instance doctors work as nurses or teachers work as school monitors. As for refugees with fewer transferable skills, lower education levels and limited language skills, they face greater difficulties in finding regular and decent employment, and often hold informal odd jobs enabling them to cope with their daily needs only.

#### ○ *Specific issues related to recognition of qualifications*

PoCs from all gender and diversity groups reported issues related to the lack of recognition of the qualifications and experiences acquired in the country of origin. They have no knowledge of the

procedures or solutions to have their diplomas and certificates validated or their skills tested in the absence of copies of their diplomas. As a result, most skilled refugees are prevented from accessing qualified jobs that match their professional experience, especially in the health and education sectors.

Key informants indicated that a commission of the MFPTEMA<sup>1</sup> is in charge of assessing requests for equivalence of diplomas, and that for technical sectors, this equivalence is done by specific entities such as the College of Physicians for medical doctors' applications.

## 2.2 Overall legal and policy environment conducive to refugee employment

### ○ *A favourable but incomplete legal framework*

Mauritania has ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol but is yet to adopt a national asylum law and set up a comprehensive national asylum system. In this context, UNHCR conducts registration and refugee status determination. PoCs are issued with secured UNHCR documentation recognized by governmental authorities allowing freedom of movement and contributing to the prevention of *refoulement*. The inclusion of urban PoCs in the national civil registration system started in 2014 but was stopped in 2016, and concerned PoCs were not issued with national documentation. As of April 2019, the enrolment of urban PoCs with the national agency in charge of civil registration (ANRPTS<sup>2</sup>) should resume, which should help substantially in making them visible and ensuring their inclusion into national systems.

The 022/2005 Decree creating the National Consultative Committee on Refugees (CNCR) and setting the implementation modalities for the 1951 Convention, summarizes Articles 17 to 19 of the 1951 Convention into two articles:

- Article 11 (*Article 19 of the 1951 Convention*): *for the exercise of a liberal profession, a recognized refugee is considered as a foreign national of the country which has passed with Mauritania the most favourable settlement agreement with regard to the activity undertaken.*
- Article 13 (*Articles 17 and 18 of the 1951 Convention*): *a recognized refugee receives the same treatment as a national with respect to access to medical care, labour market, social security and education.*

While the decree sets a very open basis to enable refugee economic inclusion, none of these provisions have been integrated into national labour laws and are not effected in practice. Currently, national identity documentation is required for most legal processes with regards to livelihoods in Mauritania, be it to register a business, open a bank account or get a work permit.

Key informants explained that any foreigner working in Mauritania should hold a work permit, noting however that this formal requirement was only meant for qualified positions for which competitive recruitment processes are set.

In some sectors, access to work is restricted to nationals (mining industries, taxi drivers, quota within the fishing industry, etc.), while in other sectors, access may be granted to foreigners if no qualified nationals are available (e.g. medical specialists, services, etc.).

Of note though is the fact that most of the workforce in Mauritania, nationals and foreigners, are working informally<sup>3</sup>. PoCs holding UNHCR refugee cards, deemed as having a regular situation in the country, could access unqualified workforce jobs without requiring a work permit.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Vocational training, Labour, Employment and Modernization of the Administration (MFPTEMA).

<sup>2</sup> Agence Nationale du Registre des Populations et des Titres Sécurisés.

<sup>3</sup> This information concurs with IOM 2015 market study 'Etude de marché des secteurs porteurs d'emplois pour le personnel peu ou pas qualifié en Mauritanie' which reports that 86.5% of the workforce in Mauritania is working informally.

For PoCs wishing to access qualified positions, their employers would need to first approach the ANAPEJ, the National agency for the promotion of youth employment, to check whether the required profile exists in the ANAPEJ database. In case the position cannot be filled by a national, the company would be able to hire a foreigner who will be issued a residency card and work permit. In such cases, a national identification number is required (NNI). Work permits are issued by the Directorate for Employment and require the following documents: a request form, a copy of the resumé, pictures, a copy of the passport or national identity card, and a certificate of employment. To remove the requirement of submitting a national identity document and use the UNHCR refugee card instead, key informants indicated that endorsement by the Ministry of Interior should be sought.

UNHCR Mauritania does not have any record of registered refugees having obtained a work permit in Mauritania as at today.

The enrolment of employees in the national social security system (CNSS<sup>4</sup>) lies with employers. Key informants from the Labour inspection service explained that some employers do not declare and enrol employees to avoid paying additional fees. The Head of the Migration Unit at the CNSS explained that he had no previous experience with enrolment of refugees and asylum-seekers. Approval of the Directorate of Labour at the MFPTEMA could help facilitate this process.

- **Opportunities in the local labour markets of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou**

Regarding available opportunities in the labour market, all key informants indicated that the local economy and market should be able to absorb around 1,600 PoCs between 18 and 55 years old in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou with various socio-economic profiles. Sectors in need of workforce are different depending on the location. In Nouadhibou, all sectors linked to the fishing industry such as catering, welding, electricity and maintenance are in need of workforce. In Nouakchott, construction, services, catering and the fishing industry are among the sectors in which workforce is needed.

### 2.3 Presence of various socio-economic inclusion support programmes

A broad range of service providers, both public and private, national and international, present in Mauritania are implementing programmes linked to access to training opportunities, informal and formal employment. UN agencies, including the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) are supporting such programmes. Development actors such as the German (GIZ) and French (AFD) agencies for development are also engaged in this sector.

Mauritania is keen to share and put forward best practices at regional and international levels, and is thus a member of the Alliance 8.7 launched in March 2019. The Alliance 8.7 is a platform aiming at eradicating forced labour, modern slavery, human trafficking and child labour. UNHCR leads the Action Group of the Alliance 8.7 on Conflicts and Humanitarian Framework, which provides a forum to discuss the worst forms of exploitation endured by refugees, asylum-seekers and persons at risk of statelessness.

A national strategy for employment has also been developed, with the participation of UNDP, ILO and IOM. While it has been finalized, there is room for UNHCR's engagement in ensuring refugee inclusion during the next phase, with the development of an action plan to implement the strategy.

The National agency for the promotion of youth employment (ANAPEJ) has partnerships with ILO and IOM, and is currently expanding its partnerships with external actors, developing its mobility

<sup>4</sup> Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale



programmes with the creation of a cell on mobility and migration, and strengthening its presence throughout the country by absorbing the *Cap Insertion* branches, which consist of a network of offices providing guidance to youth on access to learning and training opportunities and access to employment. ANAPEJ is also a member of the World Association of Public Employment Services (WAPES). ANAPEJ expressed interest in working with UNHCR to consider ways in which refugees could benefit from existing resources and infrastructure linked to appropriate job opportunities.

The EU Delegation is also leading an employment working group with technical and financial partners at Nouakchott level, a platform that can support the mapping of inclusion opportunities for refugees as well as advocacy in this regard.

Finally, regarding access to financial services, UNHCR Mauritania has launched in January 2019 a new cash-based intervention modality to distribute assistance to refugees through pre-paid cards with the Mauritanian Bank El Amana (BEA). From initial discussions, the Bank would be opened to expand financial services to PoCs beyond the withdrawal of cash.

## 2.4 Practical obstacles faced by refugees to access decent and formal livelihoods opportunities

### o *Limited knowledge of refugee issues by authorities and employers*

In Nouakchott, most key informants from authorities had very little knowledge of the legal and policy environment applying to refugees. They were not aware of the existence of the 022/2005 Decree and the National Consultative Committee for Refugees (CNCR), a public entity made of representatives of key ministries with an advisory role on asylum issues. Only one representative from the National Institute for Vocational Trainings was aware of interventions for refugees, i.e. the ILO-UNHCR training. Others declared they had never worked with refugees or may have worked with them while unaware of their status.

There were also various interpretations of the status of refugees with regards to work right. In Nouakchott, it was indicated that refugees would be covered by provisions applicable to foreigners, while in Nouadhibou, it was explained that refugees would be considered as nationals. These different interpretations can create uncertainties among administrations and PoCs. In Nouadhibou, while contacts of local service providers with PoCs remain limited, most of them were aware of UNHCR and refugee presence in the city.

Overall, employers in companies and factories do not recognize UNHCR documents, and request PoCs to provide national identity documentation as a prerequisite for recruitment. To address this issue some Senegalese PoCs in possession of birth certificates, had to approach their consulate to obtain national ID cards to enable them to access work.

Refugees in Nouakchott reported that employers are often reluctant to employ them as they consider them as undocumented foreigners i.e. without national documentation. In Nouakchott, only employers of domestic workers easily agree to recruit PoCs who hold UNHCR cards.

Key informants from the MFPTEMA explained that authorities are working to address the widespread informal labour market notably as part of the recently adopted national strategy on employment. In this context, informal labour markets present opportunities, as PoCs have a relatively easy access to engage in livelihood activities. However, it also presents severe drawbacks, as this informality leaves many PoCs at increased risk of labour exploitation. A key informant thus explained that many employers would be aware of refugee status of concerned employees and would choose not to declare them to avoid paying taxes and pay lower salaries. As a result, refugees cannot access welfare benefits.

○ ***Lack of orientation and facilitation on socio-economic inclusion***

In urban areas, refugees and asylum-seekers are yet to be included in national programmes related to livelihood and self-reliance. The ANAPEJ reported not being aware of any interaction of their branches with refugees in the past.

Current UNHCR interventions to support livelihood and self-reliance of urban refugees are limited to microcredits through a national partner (Djikke) targeting 94 beneficiaries, and vocational training opportunities through ILO (6 beneficiaries). ALPD also provides non-certified training opportunities to 50 individuals per year in sewing, dyeing, hairdressing, computer science and cooking. Refugee graduates from these programmes requested support to find a job following completion of their training courses.

Beside microcredits and vocational training, many refugees requested support with regards to job placement and/or development of microprojects. Upon arrival in Mauritania, most persons of concern report that they rely on their respective communities for orientation on how and where to find a job. There are no broader interventions or referrals to existing programmes that would facilitate access to self or wage employment, or a strategy to ensure that livelihood interventions are made with a view to enhance self-reliance of refugees.

Self-employed refugees face particular difficulties, as there are many requirements to register a business including national identity documentation with a visa or residence permit, having a bank account, an address in Mauritania, and paying a fee. The Deputy Director of the Guichet Unique in charge of such registration was aware of only one case of a Syrian refugee who had been able to register his business, as he could provide a residency permit. UNHCR was encouraged by PoCs to consider ways to advocate in favour of refugee access to this procedure.

In spite of these challenges, there are opportunities as many PoCs are actively seeking training and job opportunities and would like to become self-reliant. They are mostly young refugees or heads of households. Only a minority of refugees deem that humanitarian assistance and/or resettlement are the only viable ways for them to cover their basic needs, they mostly are community leaders and refugees who have lived in Mauritania for an extended period.

○ ***Limited access to financial services***

The participatory exercise did not focus on access to financial services. However, during focus group discussions in Nouakchott, PoCs reported their lack of access to bank accounts and loans as an important issue. If PoCs do not hold a national identification number given by the National agency for civil registration (ANRPTS) following biometric enrolment, they cannot open a bank account in Mauritania. In Nouadhibou though, a local bank agreed to open accounts for PoCs; details on the accounts' types and requirements were not known to the participants of the participatory assessment. A key informant explained that the Mauritanian Central Bank should be approached to seek its approval to recognize UNHCR documentation and overcome the documentation requirement to open a bank account.

As many PoCs are sharing dwellings with other refugees or migrants, they cannot keep their savings at home and often leave them with the owners of local shops. This situation sometimes creates issues when shop owners refuse to give back all or part of the money entrusted to them. Local shops are also used sometimes to obtain loans and credits.

In addition, refugees cannot access loans which limits their ability to start their own businesses. As for existing microcredit possibilities, their modalities were not understood by many persons of concern, who see this financial service as a donation or a loan from UNHCR, both in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. As a result, some refugees were frustrated as they felt discriminated against for not being selected for the microcredit programmes, as they did not understand the selection criteria.

Others had applied and obtained a microcredit without understanding the consequences, notably in case of no reimbursement.

## 2.5 Difficult working conditions with acute challenges for specific groups

### ○ *Stigmatization and limited interactions with host communities*

Refugees from West and Central Africa reported regular occurrences of discriminatory treatment in their daily lives, notably with regular arbitrary arrests which impede their ability to work regularly. Some PoCs reported having lost their jobs when they were late or missed working days due to arrest by security officials on their way to work.

LGBTI refugees reported regular occurrences of stigmatization when trying to find jobs in companies. Many explained that employers refused to recruit them stating it would be an issue with their customers. As a result, most LGBTI refugees interviewed during the exercise resort to work as domestic workers in houses in spite of the difficult working conditions, mostly in Tevragh Zeina considered as a relatively safe and more open area.

In Nouadhibou, PoCs also reported stigmatization, but the overall access to work would be less problematic and arbitrary arrests based on nationality less frequent, as many foreigners are working in the city.

In both Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, interactions with the host communities remain limited to employers and, when relevant, to customers. PoCs were not brought by employers to work in Mauritania, they all found their work locally upon arrival, mostly thanks to referrals from community members. Interactions of English speakers from Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Liberia with host communities are almost inexistent due to the language barrier.

### ○ *Difficult working conditions and lack of safety and security*

In Nouakchott, refugees from all age, gender, and diversity groups reported high levels of exploitation, long working hours, for low and irregular remuneration and in difficult conditions. Terms of reference given at the time of recruitment are rarely respected and PoCs end up working extra hours for additional tasks.

Refugee women and LGBTI reported regular incidences of violence from host communities on their way to work and at the workplace. Some women had faced sexual harassment and verbal abuse, and LGBTI PoCs reported regular beatings and verbal abuse. Several coping mechanisms were developed by PoCs, with some overnighing at their workplaces in the case of domestic workers based in Tevragh Zeina. However, other workers, due to the high cost of living in Tevragh Zeina, have to cross the city to go to work which exposes them further to safety and security issues. Youth selling products in the streets (e.g. shoes) have often their goods stolen, and some reported that local security officials may request money from them.

In spite of these difficult working conditions, and safety and security issues, most PoCs are unable or unwilling to seek and obtain police protection given their precarious status in Mauritania.

### ○ *Lack of access to protection mechanisms*

Many refugees lack information on their rights related to decent work, and even when they do have knowledge of their legal entitlements to work or protection in the workplace, they are often reluctant to assert these for fear of being sued. They fear that any complaint about their employers could turn against them due to their status. In particular, LGBTI PoCs reported that employers threaten to denounce them to the police as LGBTI persons if they complain about their late or low salaries and harsh working conditions.

Refugees also reported a lack of reactivity from UNHCR (hotline) and partner (lawyer) in answering PoCs' requests for support. In addition, police and judicial officials often have little knowledge of refugee law, which make refugees vulnerable to unfair treatment with respect to their rights. In some cases, refugees rely on personal connections, when they know a Mauritanian national (employer, imam, etc.) who can intervene in their favour in case of arrest to facilitate their release.

## 2.6 Difficult living conditions for marginalized PoCs and those unable to be self-reliant

Furthermore, PoCs have reported an insufficient level of assistance which leads many to resort to negative coping mechanisms and exposes them to heightened protection risks.

### ○ *Inadequate level of assistance to persons unable to engage into livelihoods activities*

In Mauritania, urban PoCs are not included in national safety net systems and the level of assistance received from UNHCR is insufficient. The format of the participatory assessment did not aim or allow to size the number of individuals unable to engage in livelihoods activities because of their age, medical conditions, or because they are single heads of households with young children, etc. However, refugees highlighted such limitations during the participatory assessment.

5% of registered PoCs receive monthly cash assistance from UNHCR, amounting NUM 1,000 per month (around USD 27).

Two main issues relating to UNHCR cash assistance interventions have been raised by refugees. Refugees claimed that many vulnerable PoCs who are unable to engage in income generating activities are not included in the cash assistance list. The targeting of assistance would need to be reviewed. Current targeting is done through UNHCR partner's initial assessment of the PoC's situation and reviewed by a multifunctional team. The partner assesses PoCs that approach its office, and thus many PoCs unable to come forward might indeed not be targeted although they may be eligible.

Regarding the amounts provided, all identified PoCs receive 1,000 NUM per month (around USD 27) which represents 20% of the minimum expenditure basket. Refugees reported that this amount is far too low to cover their most basic needs and their dependents' when relevant.

### ○ *Development of negative coping mechanisms*

To cope with their daily needs and complement their limited or absence of income, many persons of concern resort to negative coping mechanisms.

PoCs without community support are the most likely to develop such mechanisms. Indeed, PoCs reported that if they need support they would turn first to their families and communities. This solidarity varies greatly depending on the communities, with Arabic and English speakers tending to be more supportive of each other than other communities such as the French speakers. Other communities such as the LGBTI refugee community have a strong sense of unity, but with very little financial means to support each other. Of note, LGBTI refugees reported negative interactions with the national LGBTI communities and explained that they receive no solidarity from them.

In Nouadhibou, PoCs from all age and gender groups reported having received some support from the host communities.

Reported negative coping mechanisms include prostitution, child labour, selling of belongings, and debt. These behaviours are putting vulnerable PoCs at heightened risks of SGBV, child protection issues and conflict with the law for instance when PoCs are unable to reimburse micro-credits or loans.

## 3. Conclusions

- Although Mauritania continues to be seen as a temporary place of refuge by many refugees, their **average duration of stay is increasing**, with very limited prospects for return in the next few years. In this context, and in line with the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the operation's Multi-Year/Multi Partner protection and solutions strategy (MYMP), **livelihood and economic inclusion** of urban persons of concern in Mauritania should be set as a priority and a key tool to ensure protection outcomes and local solutions.
- In Mauritania, the **legal and policy environment does not restrict refugees' ability to achieve self-reliance**. The Mauritanian legal framework however remains incomplete in the absence of a national asylum law. In addition, authorities met were often unaware of PoCs' presence and status. However, the environment is favourable insofar as the authorities consulted during the participatory assessment expressed readiness to set up and facilitate access of refugees to the labour market.
- According to key informants, the **local labour market** would have the **capacity to absorb** both qualified and unqualified refugees.
- In practice, the **widespread informal labour markets** often leave refugees at heightened risk of exploitation, notably due to the lack of knowledge by the authorities and employers on the status of refugees in the overall system, and a lack of protection mechanisms.
- There is a **wide variety of socio-economic profiles among refugees and asylum-seekers** registered with UNHCR Mauritania with differentiated levels of inclusion and self-reliance. Most urban PoCs live in the two main urban areas of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou; they have developed strategies to cope and generate income, mainly through jobs in the informal sector. Most PoCs are willing to work and become self-reliant but their working conditions are often poor, with numerous reports of exploitation. Apart from a few better-off families, **overall living conditions remain difficult, if not extremely difficult**.
- PoCs are **not included in public employment services**. Support from UNHCR and partners to PoCs who can engage in livelihood activities is limited, and assistance to those unable to do so is insufficient. So far in urban areas, UNHCR has partnered with ILO on vocational training, and six urban PoCs are benefitting from this programme in 2019. There is considerable room to strengthen this strategic partnership to target more refugees, and widen the scope of operational partners.
- **Financial inclusion of PoCs remains limited and ad hoc**, with access to micro credit<sup>5</sup> for some of them, and access to bank services limited to Nouadhibou only.

<sup>5</sup> Based on information available to UNHCR, refugees access micro credit on a subsidized basis only, through a UNHCR partner.

# 4. Recommendations

## Support urban refugees' socio-economic inclusion in Mauritania

- **Engage in strategic advocacy and partnership with authorities, UN agencies and other relevant actors for inclusion of PoCs in existing livelihood interventions:**

- Carry out a rapid institutional mapping to identify opportunities for inclusion of refugees and initiate discussion with potential organizations, including development partners, building on information already gathered during this participatory assessment.

UNHCR has built partnerships with development actors, donors, ministries and the private sector in the context of the Mali situation, which could be leveraged for refugees in urban areas. In addition, there are many existing programmes supported by ILO, IOM, GIZ, etc. dedicated to livelihoods and self-reliance for Mauritanian nationals, with a focus on youth, with which UNHCR could advocate for refugee inclusion.

- Define specific targets to build a favorable policy environment for refugee self-reliance, and partner with and build the capacity of national institutions to deliver services for refugees. Issues for dialogue with national authorities include:

- o recognition of diplomas and professional certifications,
- o access to work permits,
- o access to financial services,
- o access to training and learning opportunities,
- o and access to formal and informal employment.

- Provide local authorities, employers, businesses and public service providers e.g. banking, social security with information on refugee rights and documentation, what refugees have to offer, and the facilitation they need.

- Provide individual refugees and refugee communities with updated information on rights and legal obligations related to wage and self-employment, business registration, access to training, and the architecture of services available to them. Inform refugees with diplomas and professional certification from their home countries about processes to obtain their equivalence/recognition.

- **Develop evidence and market-based livelihood interventions to enhance refugee self-reliance**

- Conduct a socio-economic assessment and market study to enable the development of market-based interventions. Improve data collection in UNHCR's database on education and socio-economic profiles of PoCs.

- Review the structure of partnerships to ensure expertise on livelihoods and self-reliance and establish solid coordination and referral mechanisms to existing service providers and employers.
- Develop the capacity and knowledge of UNHCR staff on livelihood.

### Ensure identification of and response to PoCs unable to engage in livelihoods activities

- **Review targeting approach and assistance level:**

- Carry out a socio-economic profiling of urban refugees to inform livelihood interventions and the targeting of assistance.
- Review targeting methods for cash assistance to systematically take into account socio-economic and protection vulnerabilities. The socio-economic assessment will inform further targeting by providing a categorization of the population by vulnerabilities/capacities in terms of self-reliance.
- Review the level of assistance taking into account the minimum expenditure basket.
- Continue advocating with the World Bank and relevant national actors in view of the inclusion of urban refugees in the national safety net system.

- **Engage with refugee and host communities on the identification of and support to persons with specific needs:**

- Systematize outreach to enable the identification of the most vulnerable PoCs in need of support.
- Engage with refugee families and communities and mobilize them for the identification of and support to persons with specific needs, including those unable to engage in livelihoods activities.
- Encourage interventions that target both refugee and host communities.

# PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT REPORT 2019

UNHCR BO Nouakchott

March 2019



**UNHCR MAURITANIA**

Ilot K No. 143,  
Route de la Corniche,  
B.P. 4405, Nouakchott,  
Mauritania  
[www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)