MAURITANIA Food Security Outlook Update

June 2012

Poor food security conditions in spite of the start-up of assistance programs

Key messages

- A number of humanitarian operations planned for potential problem areas since April have been delayed, which means that households experiencing acute food insecurity will not receive all assistance in time to prevent a further escalation in food insecurity levels during the lean season. If humanitarian assistance programs are not underway by mid-July, very poor and poor households in agropastoral and rainfed farming areas will be in IPC Phase 3: Crisis until September of this year.

- Southern Mauritania is likely to see below-normal rainfall activity. However, with an adequate spatial-temporal distribution of rainfall, there is still a chance for normal levels of crop and pasture production in farming and pastoral areas. Once the rainy season gets underway in or around the middle of July and irrigated farming activities start up, it will be possible to assess the impact on grain and pasture production.

- Since May, the government has imposed unusual restrictions on the re-export of Mauritanian goods to Mali, reducing the flow of Malien cereals that supply Mauritanian markets in both border areas and agropastoral areas (livelihood zone 5). The ensuing rapid decline in local grain (millet and sorghum) availability and rise in prices in border areas since May could erode the purchasing power of households already facing acute food insecurity.

- Pastoral conditions in rainfed agriculture zone have been undermined by the influx of approximately 60,000 head of livestock belonging to refugees. Any further rise in demand for animal feed could affect grain (wheat and sorghum) availability on markets in the eastern reaches of this livelihood zone (Bassikounou and Amour), where grain supplies have been curtailed by border controls.

Updated food security outlook through September 2012

Crop production

ACMAD (the African Center of Meteorological Applications for Development) is predicting a below-average to average rainy season. If rainfall distribution is normal, even with below-normal rainfall activity, normal levels of crop and pasture production are possible. However,
the combined effects of poor distribution and expected rainfall deficits would be extremely serious for both the planting and the subsequent growth and development of crops. Any speculation as to the likelihood of a normal growing season will be deferred until the beginning of the rainy season in mid-July. In the meantime, the earlier than usual light rainfall activity in agropastoral and rainfed farming areas in May sparked the interest of farmers, who have begun to implement farming-based livelihood strategies. However, pending the resolution of problems with poor seed access and the protection of crops from straying animals, any mass return migration by the rural workforce is unlikely, even if rainfall conditions prove better than currently expected. To encourage irrigated farming activities, the government has programmed the planting of 210,000 hectares of land for rainfed crops with assistance from the FAO in the form of more than 500 metric tons of seeds, which have already been purchased. Humanitarian agencies in the Senegal River Valley and agropastoral areas (Brakna and Boghé) are delivering seed aid to close to 3,000 poor farm families in more than 20 villages in Gorgol, Brakna, and Boghé.

Market situation
Retail markets are still well-stocked with imported grain. Mauritanian government restrictions on exports to Mali could limit coarse grain imports, which are generally purchased with income earned from sales of these exports. In general, prices are stable, with small cyclical swings in prices with the implementation of certain assistance programs and the faltering demand from pastoralists having resumed their seasonal migration towards southwestern Mali (Kayes). Internal market flows of coarse grains are virtually non-existent. With the sole exception of markets in areas bordering on North Africa, Mali, and Senegal provisioned by cross-border trade, rural markets are all getting their supplies directly from Nouakchott. Livestock prices in central and southern agropastoral and transhumant pastoral areas are still rapidly falling. In contrast, prices in rainfed farming areas are comparatively stable and prices in western agropastoral areas are on the rise.

Contrary to expectations in April and May, reliance on wheat and rice will not fall, as assistance programs are only partially underway and limited to localized areas, and therefore have been unable to effectively bring down current food insecurity levels. The impending arrival of assistance programs has, however, revived certain borrowing-based strategies, which could have a positive impact if assistance programs are implemented effectively. Moreover, poor households will continue to buy wheat due to its competitive price (30 to 40 percent below prices for millet and sorghum). However, wheat prices can be expected to rise in the near future as supplies tighten, limiting the amount of wheat used to feed livestock with wheat and groundnut-based feed cakes. The climb in wheat prices could pick up speed between July and August in the event of a shortfall in rainfed grain production. Livestock prices will continue to fall through the end of July and sales will slump as the number of buyers dwindles in the face of the growing difficulty and increasingly high cost of maintaining (feeding, watering, and tending) animals and the high risk of losses (from animal deaths).

Humanitarian assistance
Assistance programs originally designed to cover five months worth of food needs (April through August) in many areas in experiencing a food crisis have still not started up or are only partially operational. Nonetheless, they have still managed to improve food access for poor households. In fact, since their targeting phases have gotten underway, traders have been making more food loans, confident that they will be repaid from eventual distributions of food rations (wheat and oil) and cash benefits (of around 15,000 MRO). With the exception of programs in Adig (serving Gorgol and Guidimakha) and Amsela (serving Gorgol) underway since the end of May, the assistance programs scheduled to start up in April did not get off the ground until the beginning of June. The government has canceled its assistance for SAVS programs (village-level food security reserves) but will continue distributions of free food aid to 109,857 households in at-risk areas and 180,000 urban dwellers until September. The expected response from the WFP to complement efforts to continue to stock SAVS programs should provide 5,500 MT of grain for more than 152,000 beneficiaries countrywide during this same period.

Rainfed agriculture zone
There are approximately 71,000 Malian refugees in the Mbera camp in southeastern Mauritania. Current deliveries of humanitarian aid are sufficient to meet their food needs. In fact, they are now receiving regular food rations, which will continue to be distributed between beginning in June to cover the needs of 70,000 refugees. The efficacy of this humanitarian aid is reflected in trends on local markets, where food availability and prices have generally been stable. Even with the benefit of this assistance, many refugees are still engaged in selling firewood, charcoal, and straw, in small-scale trading, and in providing rural transport services with carts and, in some cases, small vans, etc., which are the main sources of income for poor local households. This is eroding the food security of poor host households in spite of regular market supplies of imported foodstuffs and relatively stable prices, particularly that of pastoral households choosing not to engage in seasonal migration, whose animals are competing with the livestock of the refugees (approximately 60,000 animals). This problem is exacerbated by the limited supply of pasture resources and low levels of water reserves. Any further rise in
Livelihood conditions for poor households appear to be in line with seasonal tendencies, and include borrowing, credit, cutbacks in food intake, and the frequent skipping of meals. With the smooth operation of social cooperation networks (in which the cash benefits and food rations allocated to targeted poor households are redistributed among all poor local households equally), assuming that assistance programs (cash transfer programs, distributions of free food aid, and the restocking of village-level food security reserves) get underway before the middle of July and absent any major price shocks or long-term disruptions in market supply channels, there should not be any further sharp escalation in what are already crisis levels of food insecurity (IPC Phase 3) as of mid-July. However, a delay in the beginning of the rainy season or protracted delays in deliveries of humanitarian aid could upset the current delicate balance between the needs and means of poor households and drive Phase 3: Crisis conditions, or emergency conditions, through August/September.

**Agropastoral zone**

Thus far, food availability has been ensured by good market supplies and bolstered by the restocking of SAVS and SACS programs (village and community-level food security reserves) and the continued operation of government-subsidized “Solidarity Program” shops. Income from sales of livestock is up, with the resumption of seasonal migration sharply tightening supplies and driving up prices. Unlike the situation in transhumant pastoral areas, there is still no sign of return migration by livestock, though pastoralists choosing not to migrate with their animals are still resorting to the use of animal feed, in most cases, obtaining feed cakes made from wheat, cottonseed, and groundnuts from importers on credit. Wage rates for pastoral workers, which had been down by 10 to 15 percent up until May, improved slightly with the arrival of camel herds from the southern reaches of livelihood zone 2 (mixed pastoral and oases, with cultivation of wadis). The large concentrations of pastoralists around watering holes close to major arteries (Guimi in Brakna and Hassi Dehen in Assaba) have fueled demand for labor, further increasing wage rates, which are currently up to approximately 25,000 MRO, compared with 15,000 MRO in May.

Coping strategies continue to hinge on changes in eating habits (the consumption of wheat and food pastes) and cutbacks in the size and number of meals (from the usual three to only one or two meals). Social cooperation networks are using benefits from individual assistance programs (distributions of free food rations and cash transfer programs) for collective crisis management (food loans and/or meal sharing, group meals, etc.) More and more communities are taking a more socially responsible approach to the management of food security reserves (SAVS and SACS), with provisions for secured loans or loans backed by a more creditworthy third party. This allows poor households to borrow grain and pay back the loan as soon as they are in a better position to do so. This is a new type of arrangement designed to improve the food access of households without means without charging usurious interest rates, in which the borrower’s repayment obligation is limited to the original amount of the loan.

**Transhumant pastoral area**

The food security situation of middle-income and better-off households has visibly deteriorated as a result of overgrazing problems and the inadequacy of government assistance programs for pastoralists. Pastoralists in seasonal grazing areas in Senegal are returning home, claiming that, in spite of the availability of pasture and water, their animals are unable to adapt and they are sustaining large losses. As a result, their main strategy has simply been to increase sales to the point of saturating the market and driving down cattle prices compared with figures for the same time last year, or by 53 percent in the case of bull calves and 60 percent in the case of dairy cattle. Many pastoralists are still forced to resort to the use of animal feed with the planting of hot off-season rice crops in irrigated areas in the Senegal River Valley depriving them of the use of what had previously been pastureland. This year, with the shortfall in rice production for the winter growing season, many rice farmers decided to grow hot off-season crops which will not be ready for harvesting until the end of June or the beginning of July, thereby limiting viable grazing areas for pastoralists. Normally, pastoralists use these irrigated areas to graze their animals after the harvest in March, until the planting of irrigated crops in June. The situation of poor pastoralists is not that different than usual who, by this time of year, having reached their selling limit, are forced to resort to borrowing. The food security situation of middle-income households, which account for close to 30 percent of the local population, could deteriorate in the event of insufficient rainfall activity to ensure adequate levels of pasture production. There is a high probability of a deterioration in the food security status of middle-income households in this livelihood zone...
as of the beginning of July which, bypassed by assistance programs, will be forced to continue selling animals in order to buy household food supplies and animal feed pending significant new pasture growth, which is not expected until August at the earliest. This is also true of middle-income pastoralists in the western and central reaches of Aleg department, whose livelihood patterns are increasingly similar to those in transhumant pastoral areas.

**Seasonal calendar and timeline of critical events**

![Seasonal calendar diagram](image)

*Source: FEWS NET*