FAMINE EARLY WARNING SYSTEM NETWORK ◆ MAURITANIA
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MONTHLY REPORT FOR NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2000

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Summary

The harvest of *Dieri* (rainfed) crops is still under way. Productivity has been better than average because the rains were well distributed and Sesamia caterillarscaused less damage than in 1999. Despite some periods of stress and the fact that many pockets in both Hodhs and in Brakna Wilayas were affected by dry spells, the national production of *Dieri* is higher overall than *Dieri* production last year. In many production zones, *Dieri* crops helped put an end to the hungry period (*soudure*) and improved the food situation of farming households.

Farmers working in the bottomlands (*bas-fonds*) are confident because the agricultural conditions for this production system are still good (reservoirs behind the dams are filled to a good level and rainfall was well distributed in the rainfed lowlands). Almost everywhere, there is an increase in cultivated areas because the *Dieri* harvest reinvigorated working capacity of farmers who do not hesitate to plant new areas behind the dams as flood waters recede. The crops are in very good growing condition. Besides some passing swarms of locusts in the northern areas, the technical services of the Ministry of Rural Development and Environment (MDRE) do not report pests (grasshoppers and sesamia) that might harm the major crops. On the other hand, grain-eating birds caused significant harm to maturing *Dieri* and irrigated crops. The minor crops (watermelons and cowpeas) have been less productive following attacks by aphids and Spanish flies (*cantharrides*).

Conditions of the *Walo* crop (flood recession agriculture) are not good. Cresting of the Senegal River was late and its duration was short (two to three weeks depending on the site), whereas ideally, it should be about ten weeks. Moreover, the heavy rains, which fell before the flood, helped weeds to grow so densely that some farmers were disheartened and gave up cultivating their land. Crops planted in November were partly lost when rainfall submerged the ridges, but where plants had already emerged, the rains were very helpful. Planted areas were generally smaller than those in 1999 or even than in a normal year. The *Walo* crop will amount to much only in Gorgol Wilaya, where the tributaries of the Senegal River (Gorgol and Gorfa) flooded 8,000 hectares in the Maghama plain and 3,000 hectares in the Fori plain between Kaëdi and Lexeïba.

In the irrigated sector, the decrease of planted areas has been confirmed. The wilayas most affected by this decrease are Trarza and Brakna. In Trarza Wilaya, the water level in the River was not high enough to flood the smaller branches from which rice farmers take water for irrigation. Prospects for off-season crops (planted in areas of residual moisture), therefore, are dim.

Livestock conditions are satisfactory even though nodular skin disease is now widespread. Some flare-ups of foot-and-mouth disease were also reported in pastoral areas of Trarza, Gorgol, Brakna and Guidimaka Wilayas. Seasonal livestock migration is still very limited and occurs mostly in the central parts of the country. Bush fires that have started to cause great damage in Gorgol and both Hodhs are a major source of concern because they could rapidly destroy existing pasture resources. Moreover, heavy

passing clouds are darkening the skies, and the herders are concerned by the coming of winter rains which harm the pastures and the livestock, because they could cause dry grasses to rot and, it is claimed, animals to catch numerous diseases.

The improvement of productivity in some production areas brought a decrease in the levels of vulnerability to food insecurity in Assaba, central and southern Hodh el Gharbi, southwestern Hodh El Chargui Wilayas. A significant decrease in food insecurity levels has occurred in the structurally food insecure areas in the Aftout part of Brakna (Aleg and Magta-Lahjar) and of Gorgol (Monguel and M'Bout), as well as southeastern Maghama Moughataa (Belougués zone) and of Affolé (southern part of Tamchett Moughataa). On the other hand, food security is declining in the Senegal River valley, mainly in the south of M'Bagne, Bababé, Boghé and R'Kiz Moughataas. In these areas, the poor *Dieri* production (or even its absence) has extended the hungry period for groups of some farmers who lost their production in 1999 because of the floods (irrigated crops) and the sesamia caterpillars (flood recession and bottomland crops). The high average price of one *moud* (4 kg) of millet (150 to 200 UM) at this time of the year in production areas only confirms the high level of deficit of the production. In a year of near-normal production when farmers start to harvest their *Dieri* crops, the price of one *moud* of millet is around 50 UM.

The food security of pastoralists is still good. The sales of milk strengthen their purchasing power and improve their access to other traded food products. The migrating herders seem to be following their traditional migration route again. For the moment they still remain in the central part of the country.

Internal grain trades are very limited (or sometimes lacking) because the outlook for flood recession crops is in doubt. The increase in imported food prices prevents farmers from turning to the market but instead gives them an incentive to consume their own crops.

Despite some efforts made by the government, which opened food purchase centers, prices of basic foods have increased during the month of Ramadan. In fact, during this month, demand is high for sugar (up 10 UM per kg), milk (+55 UM per liter), cereals (+10 UM per kg), and meats and vegetables. These price increases affect mostly rural markets and suburban zones of the big cities, Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. The price of mutton has increased from 700 to 750 UM/kg and the price of medium quality fish that was 300 UM/kg in October has now risen to between 350 and 500 UM/kg, depending on the supply of mullet. In fact, this fish is caught mostly for its eggs; once the eggs are removed, the empty cleaned fish is sold at a very low price (10 to 40 UM per fish depending on the supply).

1. Review of Decreasing, Continuing and Emerging Food Crises

The level of food security is decreasing in those zones at risk for areas of Dieri (rainfed) crops. The food situation is worsening in the Senegal River Valley. In Adrar, after decreasing in October, food insecurity is increasing in Aoujeft and Chinguitti Moughataas; however, prospects are still good there for bottomland crops.

1.1. Decreasing Crises

The *Dieri* crop harvest helped to improve the food situation of the farmers in the Aftout and the Affolé (see Update of October 25). The current harvest of the rainfed lowlands (*Dieri* crops on clay soil) should logically improve this situation further. However, the impact of the system in which farmers incur debts by mortgaging their future crops could significantly shorten the period of for farmers whose production was very poor during the last three years. In fact, farmers will need to use this season's cereal production to pay the loans (money and food) they took from traders. Moreover, because of their precarious grain

storage practices, small granaries built of mud, sticks or straw, many farmers must sell some of their harvested crops right away. All these factors significantly limit the duration and level of the improvement in food security in both of these areas at risk. Yet, the present condition of crops grown behind dams and recessional bottomlands raises hopes for an improving food situation in the coming months. In any case, men and children and women, in particular, look much better than in October.

1.2. Continuing Food Crises

In Ajoueft and Chinguitti Moughaatas, the food situation is deteriorating again. The beneficial impact of the food distributions made in October by the Food Security Commission (CSA) subsided rapidly because the agricultural season was relatively poor. It is still too early for farmers who were deprived of the income from sale and consumption of dates to take advantage of the production in the rainfed lowlands because the most advanced crops are only in the growing and start of heading stages.

In the River Senegal Valley, the production of irrigated crops (small village perimeters) and of the *Dieri* was poor and cannot have a long-term positive impact on prevailing levels of food insecurity. These cereal production shortfalls will be all the more difficult to manage because the production of the secondary crops (watermelons and cowpea) was also poor due to pests. These crops play an important role in alleviating the hungry periods. Besides being consumed at home, these crops are also sold to urban populations and in the north of the country. Unfortunately, for this post-harvest period, farmer households are still developing their strategies for coping with poor production (skipping meals, harvesting wild foods, migrating in search of jobs, cutting wood, selling charcoal, and so on.)

In the suburban areas of Nouatchkott and Nouhadhibou, it is the impact of new increases in utility rates and food prices that weaken household food security conditions. Consumers have got used to seeing steep price increases during Ramadan these past few years. Faced with increasing demand, traders create artificial shortages that trigger price hikes. For instance, the sugar price that was 100 UM/kg increased to 110 UM/kg and milk that used to sell for 650 UM/liter is now 700 to 710 UM/liter.

Despite food distributions by the CSA during Ramadan, and the set up of controlled price shops in which produce prices are lower than on the market, many households must resort to second quality products or skip meals.

1.3. Emerging Food Crises

The late arrival of agriculturally useful rain and repeated dry spells had caused production conditions to worsen in:

- northern Assaba Wilaya (Guerrou and Boumdeïd Moughataas);
- central and southern Hodh el Gharbi Wilaya (northern Tintane, southern Aïoun el Atrouss and southeastern Kobonni Moughataas); and
- southwestern Hodh El Chargui Wilaya (northern Djiguenni, eastern Amourj and all of Bassikounou Moughataas).

The *Dieri* harvests, naturally, will help to improve improve food security conditions there for another two or three months, but farming households in these areas, almost exclusively rainfed farming households, will have to find ways to make up for their poor production. Exploitable bottomland (*bas-fonds*) for farming there is very limited. If neighboring bottomlands production zones do not produce good harvests for local marketing, these farmers will be forced to turn to border markets where grain trader activities are causing prices to climb. The next bottomlands harvest and seasonal price movements over the next several months will determine the course of the food security status of these *Dieri* farming households.

2. Current Food Security Conditions and Outlook

Regional food conditions might improve if the cropscan be protected against sesamia caterpillars. Except for Trarza, Brakna and Adrar Wilayas, all other agriculturally productive wilayas will be able to count on local market transfers to fill local production deficits. In the urban centers, increases in utility costs and food staple prices will reduce the purchasing power of low-incomegroups.

In the rural areas, except for the production areas of the Senegal River Valley (southern part of M'Bagne, Bababé, Boghé and R'Kiz Moughataas) and certain soiuthern parts of both Hodhs (from east of Kobenni to Bassikounou), the level of food insecurity is decreasing everywhere. The *Dieri* and rainy season irrigated production improved food access and income from the livestock sector have also helped to decrease food insecurity, especially in the agricultural areas where livestock have left on migration. The hungry period has been shortened. During the past several years, it lasted until February and when the bottomland or *Walo* crops produced poor harvests, the hungry period lasted until the harvest of the next *Dieri* crops in October-November. The good development of bottomland crops rasises hopes that the situation will further improve starting in February as soon as the bottomland harvest starts.

For the moment, recourse to traditional seasonal coping strategies (such as harvest, consumption and sale of wild foods, seasonal migration which reduces the burden on existing food supplies and informal income-generating activities) help farmers to better manage their food security. On the other hand, in most cases, the production of neighboring producing areas should have a mitigating impact on the areas with shortages because the cereal traders are mostly interested in production of flood recession sorghum. The quantities harvested from the *Dieri* production are really significant only in both Hodhs. Because these two Wilayas are close to Mali and weekly markets where cereal traders can buy bulk quantities at prices that are lower than those of local farmers, they are not interested in assembling Mauritanian production which is dispersed across more remote areas. Farming households in the shortfall areas of Kobonni Moughataa in Hodh El Gharbi and Néma, Djiguenni and Bassikounou Moughataas in in Hodh El Chargui, can either buy the seasonal surpluses of Tintane, Amourj and Timbédra Moughataas or cereals from Mali which are sold in the weekly markets. Logically, availability should not be a problem. Food access should be really difficult only for the poor Adwaba farmers, who comprise about 30% of the population of both Wilayas. The other agro-pastoral groups can sell a few small ruminants (the price or which is increasing due to good pastoral conditions) and buy cereals and other marketed foods, as needed.

In the production shortfall areas of the Senegal River Valley (the southern parts of the M'Bagne, Bababé, Boghé and R'Kiz Moughataas), it will be harder for households to fill the shortage. The surrounding production areas are unable to release surpluses that might cover the demand in the Valley, because for several reasons since 1996, people in these areas have accumulated yearly production deficits. Moreover, according to the farmers themselves, levels of improving production, in those areas that harvested some crops, is low compared to a normal year. The only opportunity remaining in these areas for reducing the cereal deficit is to cultivate off-season (hot and cold seasons) irrigated crops. These areas must also overcome the common constraint most village cooperatives, ineligibility for agricultural credits, because they did not repay their prfevious loans.

In urban centers, over the short and medium term, there will be no problem of food availability. Markets are well supplied, and if expected imports materialize (285,187 MT), there will be no risk of shortages, even knowing that a sizeable part of these food imports (wheat, wheat flour, rice, and so on) is re-exported to neighboring countries (Senegal, Mali and Western Sahara). However, price increases in social services and utilities (transport, health care and medicines, water and electricity,) are certain to reduce the already very low purchasing power of poor households whose monthly income falls below

8,000 UM (about US$33, based on US$1 = 239.38 UM) and whose numbers, according to the last survey by CSA, represent 35% of the population of Nouakchott and 10% of the population of Nouadhibou.

3. National Trends Affecting All or Most of Mauritania

Cereal imports are sufficient to cover the needs of the urban population. As for the rural population, they will have to adjust their food expenditure and consumption habits in order to close their cereal deficit.

Table 1, the cereal balance sheet for Mauritania for 2000/01, shows significant shortages for locally produced as well as imported cereals (rice and sorghum). After imports, the rice deficit decreases to 50,399 MT and coarse grains (sorghum, millet and maize) will be 88,755 MT. As wheat is mostly consumed in urban areas, it can be assumed that the wheat surplus of 50,691 MT will help to offset the rice deficit. There is very little chance that the urban areas will run out of cereals. On balance, urban Mauritanians are likely to consume more than the national average availability of 143.53 kg of cereals.

Table 1. Cereal National Balance Sheet for Mauritania: 2000/01

	Rice	Wheat	Coarse Grains (Sorghum, Millet, Maize)	Total
Population				**2,722,550**
Consumption Norms (Kg/Capita/Year)	**46**	**71**	**59**	**176**
Net National Cereal Production	36,572	0	92,646	129,218
Initial Stocks, Farmers	3,000	0	6,000	9,000
Initial Stocks, Others	16,640	30,593	0,000	47,233
Total Cereals Available at National Level	**56,212**	**30,593**	**98,646**	**185,451**
Total Human Consumption	125,300	193,301	160,630	479,231
Final Stocks, Farmers	3,000	0	6,000	9,000
Final Stocks, Others	17,883	32,216	20,771	70,870
Total National Cereals Needs	**146,183**	**225,517**	**187,401**	**559,101**
Production Deficit	**-89.971**	**-194.924**	**-88.755**	**-373.650**
Planned Commercial Imports	30,508	234,494	0	265,002
Expected Food Aid	9,064	11,121	0	20,185
Total Imports	**39,572**	**235,615**	**0**	**285,187**
Net National Surplus (+) Or Deficit (-)	**-50.399**	**+50.691**	**-88.755**	**-88.463**
Apparent Consumption Per Capita (Kg)	**27.51**	**89.62**	**26.40**	**143.53**

Source: CSA, MDRE

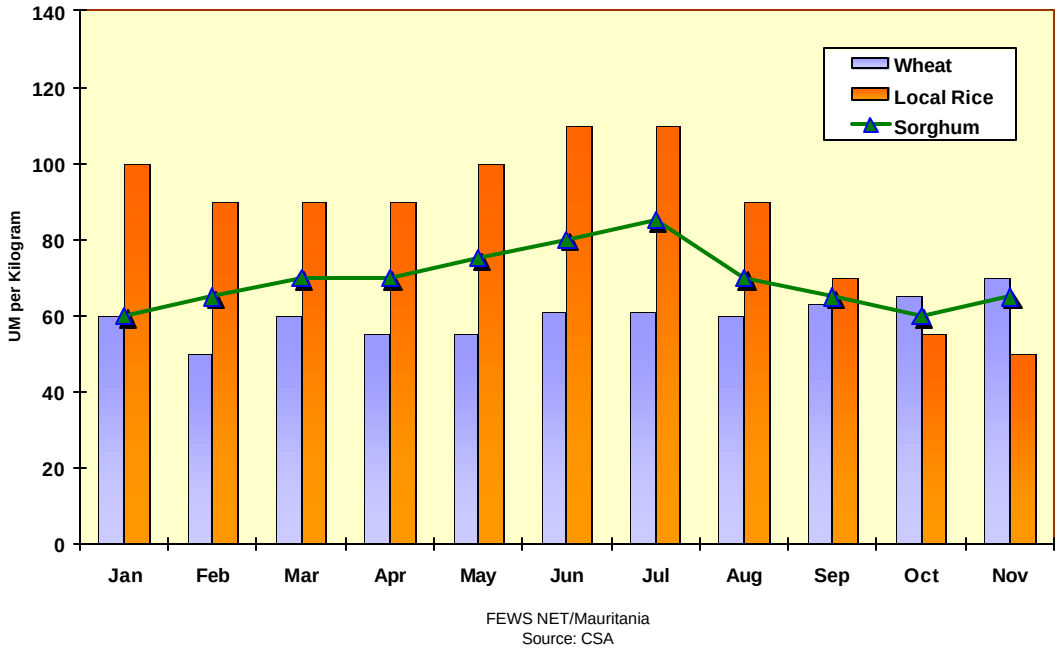
On the other hand, the sizeable deficit in traditional cereals (88,755 MT, or nearly half of consumption needs) should logically affect the rural areas because no imports of sorghum, millet and maize have been planned. It is likely that rural Mauritanians will consume even less than more than the national average availability of 143.53 kg of cereals, not to mention the consumption norm of 176 kg cereals per year. It

will be hard for rural Mauritanians to buy their cereals from commercial stocks because sorghum and millet prices are high for the season. Moreover, sorghum prices, which showed a slight decrease, reversed direction and have started to increase since the end of October. This is a signal that there will be no other price decrease before the harvest in the bottmlands in February.

4. Market Prices: Focus on Kaëdi

Section 4 looks at Kaëdi, along the Senegal River in Gorgol Wilaya, a market located in a rural cereal-producting area with diversified production systems (*Dieri*, bottomlands, *Walo* and irrigated production). This market also receives cereals from Guidimaka Wilaya, from Kayes Region in Mali and the *Walo* production zones in Senegal. In theory, this ideal location should help to moderate price fluctuations between seasons and cereals.

Figure 1. Cereal Prices in Kaedi (Gorgol Wilaya) in Mauritania: 2000



The price decrease of locally produced rice, starting in August, is explained by the arrival of rainy season rice on the market. The poor harvest of recession sorghum in 1999 (due to damage from sesamia caterpillars) has brought a structural increase in sorghum prices. The price decrease that started in August is too small for significantly affecting the level of food security in producting areas. Concerns over the *Walo* production have certainly influenced sorghum prices that started again to climb since late October. Wheat prices are also increasing. In fact, prices decrease only during free distributions of wheat food aid which, in Kaëdi Moughataa, have not occurred since July.

Increases in prices of transportation and utilities currently affect the populations' purchasing power even more than increases in imported foods, now an annual occurrence during Ramadan. The cost of interurban transportation has recently increased by 35%, the price of one cubic meter of water by 10% and electricity by 15%.

5. Areas at Risk

Areas that are traditionally at risk are still so, although production conditions have improved there. The areas of mixed agriculture cereal production systems in the Senegal River Valley will only be able to grow irrigated off-season crop this year. In some areas, this will be the third, even fourth, poor production season. In the vulnerable areas of Adrar Wilaya, the situation could improve because the physical condition of bottomland crops is satisfactory. In both Hodhs, where the Dieri crops produced good results overall, there are still pockets of poor production where people must rely upon outside support. In suburban areas of the big cities, household purchasing power will decrease.

The Aftout and Affolé are still zones at risk even though it is true that food conditions have improved in these areas. The *Dieri* crops were relatively better than those of the past five years and pastoral conditions are excellent. Good rainfall has allowed good crop production consituting a source of both food and income. Moreover, the many programs developed by the Food Security Commissariat (CSA), the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Poverty Reduction programs and some NGOs have started to bear fruit. However, the situation is still very fragile because of local social realities. Several more years of good production will be needed for the farmers of these areas to free themselves from the debts they contracted since 1996 and get back to their traditional production and food security management mechanisms. If nothing impairs the good development of bottomland crops, vulnerability levels will drop further.

In southern Aïoun El Atrouss Moughataa and in southeastern Kobenni Moughataa in Hodh El Gharbi Wilaya, as well as in Djiguenni and Bassikounou Moughataas, the disruption of crop production systems by recurring dry spells created a context of insufficient food availability which, if not corrected, could bring about localized food insecurity. However, if the traditional transfer mechanisms work and if cereal imports from Mali continue to flood the weekly market of the Wilaya, the farmers will be able to purchase their food without any problem.

On the other hand, the situation is difficult in the production areas in the Senegal River Valley (R'Kiz, Boghé, Bababé and M'Bagne Moughataas). The *Dieri* production wasn't good and the *Walo* crop is almost non-existent. These areas will not be able to rely on the marketing networks for purchasing food because production in the Aftout, which is the nearest national agricultural production area, will not be sufficient to meet demand there as well supply farming households in the Valley. The populations from Tagant, northern Brakna and northwestern Assaba Wilayas, who came by caravans to buy grain in the Valley, have already siphoned off all the cereals sold by farmers in the Aftout.

In the Adrar, the good prospects for bottomland crops in Aoudjet Moughataa could ease vulnerability there, but swarms of locusts which criss-cross the neighboring Inchiri Moughataa are a serious threat.