

MAURITANIA Food Security Update

April 2007

The availability of coarse grain in Mauritania is still limited, despite an increase in imports from Mali. Good market supplies of imported grain (rice and wheat) and the start-up of the second phase of the Village-Level Food Security Reserves (SAVS) program have improved availability, but steadily increasing prices are limiting grain access for many farming and agropastoral households in livelihood zones 5, 6 and 7 (Figure 1). In many cases, food security is further compromised by water access problems, particularly in the southeastern parts of zones 6 and 5, the western part of zone 5 (Aftout) and pastoral areas of zones 4, 2 and 1.

Food security for pastoralists is normal for this time of year, but farmers and agropastoralists that rely mainly on crop production are coping with a harder-than-usual hunger season. The high levels of poverty among these populations are curtailing their access to commercially marketed grain, and they have had to adjust their means of accessing food. Certain heads of households are reporting having already begun skipping meals. So far, there are no visible signs of severe child malnutrition, although the nutritional surveys conducted by UNICEF and the Ministry of Health in December (see the FEWS NET Mauritania March monthly report) found the highest rates of (acute and chronic) malnutrition among these two groups, justifies the food and nutrition programs targeted at these groups.

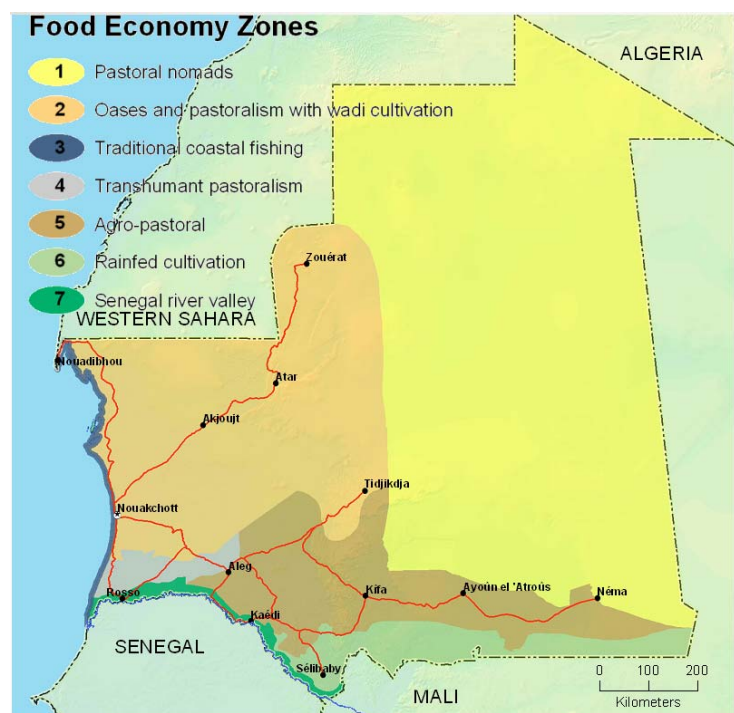
In pastoral areas, seasonal migration has begun earlier than normal by camel herders in areas where pasture is scarce (zones 1, 2 and 4 and the northern part of zone 5). Cattle herders are pushing up the date of their departure southwards and into Mali, pressured by the arrival of migrating herds from the north.

Food prices (including grain and meat) are higher than last month and above the five-year average in rural areas, but have come down slightly in Nouakchott, thanks to its diverse supply sources (including rice and vegetables from Senegal, grain from Mali, fruits and vegetables from Morocco and vegetables, wheat and oil from Europe).

The SAVSs set up by the World Food Programme (WFP) in rural areas, which serve as the main source of household grain supplies in many areas, have begun to face restocking problems, and WFP has announced that, without additional resources, there is a risk of the program shutting down.

Livestock prices are increasing steadily as supplies tighten with the decrease in sales and as cattle and sheep herders begin their seasonal migration earlier than usual.

Figure 1. Livelihood zones of Mauritania



Source: FEWS NET

Market conditions

The volume of imports of Malian grain (sales of carryover stocks from the 2005/06 harvest) is increasing, but is still less than normal. Most of this grain is going directly to large urban areas in general, and Nouakchott in particular, where unit prices for both rain-fed and flood-recession sorghum crops have risen sharply since the beginning of March (by 80 UM/kg). A steady growth in the volume of imports of Malian grain is expected, as Malian grain farmers and traders are forced to look for new markets for their crops once the rebuilding of village-level food reserves in Mali is completed.

Coarse grain supplies on rural markets are still low. However, these markets have ample supplies of imported foods (such as rice and wheat flour), whose prices, though higher than in February of this year, are still relatively close to price levels at the same time last year. Unit prices for sorghum range from 110 UM/kg in Hodh Ec Chargui, to 130 UM/kg in Guidimakha, to 140 or 150 UM/kg in Gorgol, Brakna and Trarza. Many rural households are now turning to imported wheat, whose price ranges from 5000 to 6000 UM per 50 kg sack.

The price of sheep has risen sharply since early March of 2006, by more than 30 percent, reflecting a tightening in supplies with herders in southern Hodh ec Chargui, Hodh ec Garbi and Assaba (the country's main source of supply) having already sold their animals and stocked up on provisions before beginning their seasonal migration. There has been a 20 to 25 percent seasonal decrease in cattle prices, reflecting the deterioration in grazing conditions, which is normal at this time of year.

Farming conditions

By now, all off-season grain crops have been harvested. Crops from market-gardening activities from the Adrar, Trarza and Gorgol regions are already in markets, facing stiff competition from Moroccan and European imports, which have been sustaining market supplies all year long. Only very small areas have been planted with off-season crops due to a lack of credit, heavy land pressure from migrating animals and grain-eating birds, and irrigation problems and, thus, are not likely to have a significant impact on food insecurity in Trarza. As a result, the country will have to continue to resort to importing grain and vegetables from North Africa and Europe to meet its needs.

Conditions in pastoral areas

There has been no change in conditions in pastoral areas since March, where seasonal migration southwards is steadily increasing. Large tracts of grazing lands are deserted due to a lack of water, and the condition of pasturelands in western and central Trarza, central and southern Brakna and northern Gorgol has been rapidly deteriorating due to overgrazing problems created by the influx of herders from the north. This has been harming small-scale herders unable to migrate, and increasing the levels of localized food insecurity. The pressure from grazing animals has been exacerbated by the proliferation of brush fires spread by strong winds. In spite of all these problems, though animal health conditions are still currently generally good, and the vaccination drive is continuing.

Plant health conditions

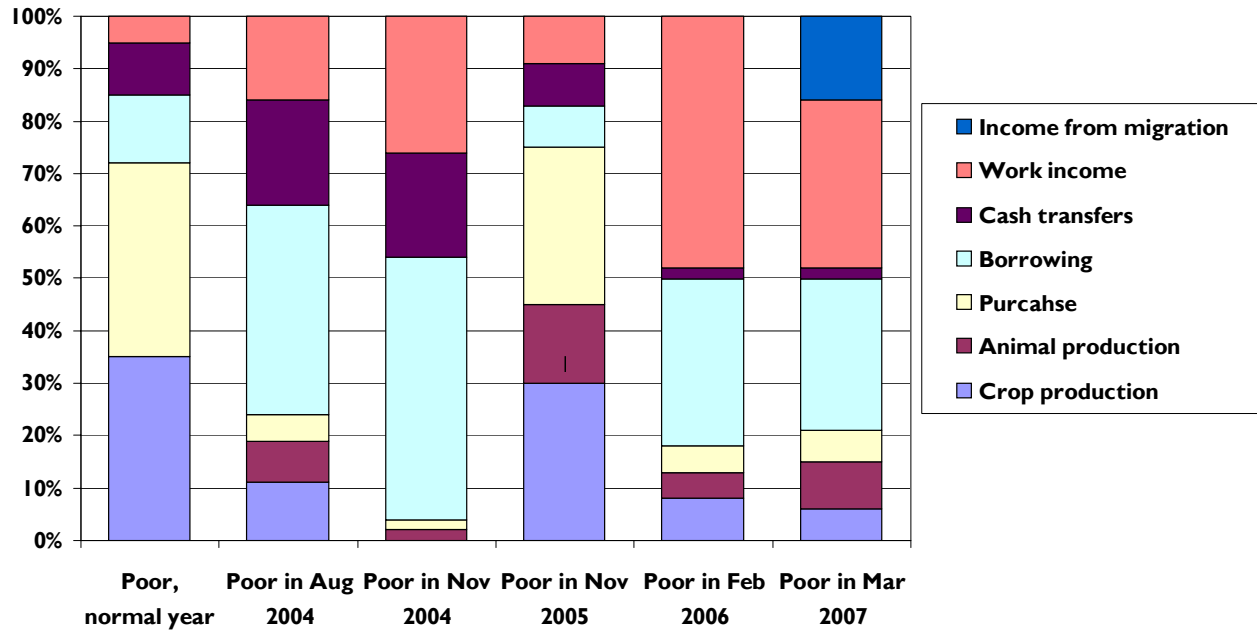
Plant health conditions are normal in all regions of the country for the time being.

Food security conditions

While the food situation throughout Mauritania is certainly problematic, it is not yet considered alarming. Food insecurity has increased in farming and agropastoral areas in the central and northern areas of the Senegal River Valley, transhumant pastoral areas and northern enclave areas between March and April. Water access problems are aggravating food insecurity problems for certain communities in livelihood zones 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6. The only way to mitigate the effects of this year's earlier than usual (or extended) lean period in these areas is by increasing traditional coping strategies, the most common of which include selling small animals, relying on SAVS (the village-level food security reserves), borrowing, migration and skipping meals (mostly the evening meal). Current conditions, which are relatively similar to the situation in February of last year (Figures 2 and 3), could deteriorate with the possible shutdown of SAVS programs, which are the main

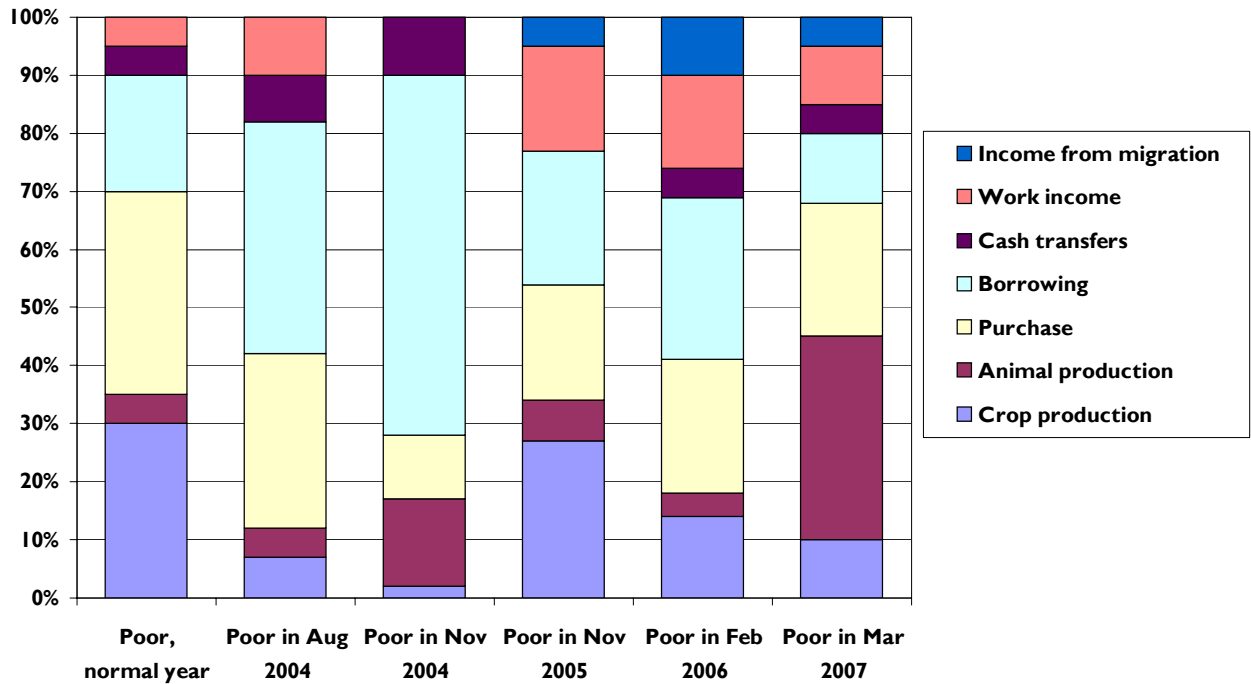
source of grain access for a large numbers of households. The only significant impact of the increased imports of Malian grain is on markets in large urban areas, where the imports have driven the prices of sorghum and cowpea prices sharply.

Figure 2. Changes in food access means in rain-fed farming areas



Source: FEWS NET Mauritania

Figure 3. Changes in food access means in agropastoral areas



Source: FEWS NET Mauritania