

**SEMINAR:** *Food Security in the MENA Region: Participation of Civil Society and Associationism*



## **Food Security in the MENA Region: Participation of Civil Society and Associationism**

1<sup>st</sup> December 2011

**MOHAMED SALECK OULD BRAHIM**

President of the Mauritanian NGO ADECA

In an international context marked by the sudden rise in food prices, the high cost of imports of the poorest countries increased by over 20% in 2010. The outlook for food insecurity is increasingly evident and alarming, even nightmarish, especially in countries with a chronic food deficit such as Mauritania.

With a structural food deficit of 70%, Mauritania regularly faces recurring crises of insecurity linked to climatic conditions such as drought, floods and plagues of locusts. These various factors of vulnerability have been exacerbated by a spectacular increase –more than 50%– in the local market prices of the main staple foods.

Population increase, poverty and unsustainable production practices have led to the deterioration of the environment, which in turn puts food security and health at even greater risk. Living conditions in the most remote regions of the country are especially harsh for rural populations that frequently suffer periods of food shortage. The high incidence of infectious diseases such as malaria, acute respiratory infections, intestinal parasites, diarrhoea and/or endemic pathologies such as Rift Valley Fever (RVF) worsen the food and nutritional situation in these regions, reducing people's capacity to work and earn income on the one hand, and increasing health-related costs on the other.

Nearly 30% of the Mauritanian population is directly or indirectly affected by food insecurity (i.e. unable to meet its basic food needs throughout the year). This situation is aggravated by the national context of poverty, the lack of investment in social and productive sectors, among them agriculture and the agro-food industry.

Even though the phenomenon is tending to spread to urban areas, it acquires greater significance in rural society. Closely linked to poverty, food insecurity is found mainly in rural areas, where it affects low-income households, those with least access to basic foods and other staple items.

In 2008, the number of people affected by moderate food insecurity rose by 126,000 and the global acute malnutrition rate exceeded 15% in some regions. The most vulnerable groups are: women, young children (25% of under-five children are underweight for their age and 30% are susceptible to retarded growth), young adults and the unemployed, small producers, the elderly, the disabled and the sick.

According to the latest survey on the prevalence of food insecurity, conducted jointly in January 2011 by the WFP (World Food Programme) and the Government of Mauritania in accordance with the Food Security Monitoring System, around 30% of households are affected by food insecurity. Nearly 50% of families have no guaranteed access to drinking water and suffer from diarrheic diseases, malaria and acute respiratory infections which cause the death of a large number of young children and women.

Rising food prices, the sudden increase in energy prices and the fall in income observed in the country in 2007 and 2008 exacerbated the structural causes of vulnerability. Staple food prices went up by more than 50% in 2007, and families that could no longer satisfy their food needs adopted high-risk strategies: reducing the quantity and quality of food.

The poor who spent more than 80% of their income on food were forced to reduce their expenditure on health and education and to sell their possessions. This led to a reduction in their consumption of meat, vegetables and dairy products and to a greatly increased dependence on imported grain.

Consequently, hunger and malnutrition –especially the “hidden hunger” linked to poor diet– are still issues of serious concern in Mauritania. Although the percentage of underweight under-five children fell from 47% in 1990 to 24% in 2006, the situation changed dramatically in 2007, when this rate shot up to over 30%.

In 2011, due to the uneven spatial and temporal distribution of rainfall which seriously affected crop growth, rain-fed crop production is expected to be 50% down on the annual average, while pasture regeneration is due to suffer for the same reason. The seasonal migration that normally begins in December for the nomads and in March for the semi-sedentary pastoralists has already begun in the south and east of the country.

The level of the Senegal River is still relatively low (three metres below the national standard). The brief immersion of the land results in a significant decrease in the productivity of recession crops (*walo*). The situation regarding locusts is settled and no abnormal epizootic diseases have been reported since July. The poor families who

represent around 60% of the population in rain-fed farming and agro-pastoral areas are the most affected by this situation.

According to some forecasts, by January 2012 the size of the food-insecure population is likely to triple this year's figure (250,000 people in January 2011). This figure is also higher than the five-year average (586,000 people) and closer to the average for the period 2005/06-2009/10 (approximately 700,000 people). In 2012, emergency aid needs will peak between April and August.

### **What needs to be done and how?**

For all the local, regional and national parties involved, food insecurity is a high priority issue. Moreover, the world food crisis and unfavourable climatic conditions intensify the urgent nature of food insecurity, which generally affects the poorest and most vulnerable families or individuals, but which also puts the country's entire population and its economy in a precarious situation.

This situation requires the planning and execution of integrated food security and nutrition programmes with interventions focusing on the main structural causes identified above. Therefore, the Mauritanian Government, with the help of the actors involved in development, should urgently implement a food security and nutrition policy that requires greater support and improved coordination and evaluation, in order to increase the efficiency of the services aimed at preventing and treating malnutrition.

The coverage, orientation and preparation of the interventions that seek to address food security needs should be greatly improved so that families with undernourished children can satisfy their basic needs. In order to reverse the rising trend of malnutrition, hunger and poverty in Mauritania, the global response to the food crisis should also include the systematic integration of sector-specific interventions relating to food aid, health, agriculture, education and social affairs both at national and local level. In order to be coherent and sustainable, this response should combine local and global policies and actions, as well as guarantee synergies to protect and promote the food security sector with an integrated approach based on a national food security strategy and a national investment plan.

Despite the severity of the overall situation, Mauritania, supported by the FAO and the WFP, is currently in the process of devising a National Food Security Strategy (SNSA) and a National Agricultural Investment Programme (PNIA), which are fully justified and reflect the political commitment at the highest level and that of civil society to combat food insecurity and meet the targets set by the SNSA and MDG 1, signed by the Mauritanian Government.

The multidimensional nature of food security requires developing a plan of priority actions and an investment programme by 2015 in order to re-launch food production and tackle the various aspects of food security, namely:

- the availability of foods of sufficient quality in sufficient quantity,
- access for all, including the most vulnerable and lowest-income groups
- food utilization and food safety, in order to contribute to a balanced and healthy diet for all,
- the stability of food supplies, which implies the need for political measures and mechanisms for the prevention/management of crises and natural catastrophes.

In 2008, Mauritania was selected as a pilot country for the REACH initiative approved by the FAO, the WHO, UNICEF and the WFP, and a REACH facilitator was deployed at the Resident Coordinator's Office to work with the various parties involved – government, UN agencies, NGOs and civil society organizations– and to devise a common strategy aimed at reducing hunger and child malnutrition.

The initiative consisted in setting up a multi-sector team comprising the main actors: government, UN agencies and national and international NGOs active in the sector. The team drew up a plan of action for nutrition to show that a series of food security interventions can be improved and extended so that it has a significant impact and, therefore, allows the country to resume its progress toward MDG 1: "halve the children malnutrition rate". This work also improved the coordination between the participants and team members who had to identify the areas of conflict or the absence of interventions and, at the same time, enabled them to take advantage of their mutual experiences.

The public perception of food security is variable. However, it is certainly the main priority of all the local agents that deploy survival strategies during periods of transition or in the wake of natural catastrophes.

Generally speaking, it has been observed that women are the main victims of this situation, but they also play the leading role in the fight against food insecurity, either as producers or as those responsible for food in the home. For this reason, agricultural and food security policies should take their needs into account and involve them in their application.

Various conditioning factors have been identified: access to means of production and to the credit system, or lack of access to markets due to insufficient financial resources, to which we must add the importance of food traditions and eating habits which in turn directly influence the food situation of families.

In order to deal with the increase in prices, the Mauritanian Government and the WFP, through the Food Security Committee (CSA), annually feed around 350,000 people belonging to the vulnerable target group: 200,000 schoolchildren, through its assistance in school canteens, while over 100,000 recipients will benefit from the 'Food for Work' scheme, thereby improving their means of subsistence.

Another initiative, the "Solidarity Shops" Operation, involves selling the main staple foods at subsidized prices, with 30-50% discounts for a certain range of products (oil, rice, wheat, sugar). 600 points of sale have been opened throughout the country.

A Government allocation of 12 to 15 million US dollars should enable these shops to operate for several months. Regardless of the problems involved in the spatial distribution of limited daily quantities, the subsidized sales strategy will not necessarily give the poorest families access to food, given that they may not have enough income to buy these products, even at a reduced price.

The Government and the other parties involved are planning further initiatives to deal with the problem of access to food, whose budgets have yet to be determined. The biggest challenge will be to provide carefully targeted and coordinated aid in the short and medium term.

### **Outlook beyond March 2012**

The food security outlook between the middle of March 2012 and the end of the consumption year in September 2012 is based mainly on the following assumptions:

- On average, grain prices will be approximately 25% higher than last year, peaking in July/August.
- The price of animal feed will go up as from September 2011, peaking in July/August 2012, and is likely to be higher than its price 7000 MRO/unit at the same time last year.
- The *Opération Solidarité* programme and/or Ramadan shops will continue to operate through August 2012.
- Global acute malnutrition rates in agro-pastoral and rain-fed farming areas are likely to surpass emergency thresholds. Therefore, emergency aid needs will peak between April and August 2012.
- The Government and the WFP will make targeted distributions of free food aid (between March and July). The volume of aid is expected to be larger than in 2010 and 2011, but will be insufficient and too late to meet all food needs through September 2012.

### **Dynamism of civil society:**

Faced with the huge food deficit of around 70%, all the parties involved in Mauritanian national life, especially Civil Society Organizations (CSO), are called upon to demonstrate real dynamism in order to redefine their role and prepare a new mission in keeping with their ambitions for the populations they seek to help.

The structural deficit situation constitutes a genuine concern for the country's authorities, which some months ago reached an agreement to involve the CSOs in the preparation of reference documents for the new National Food Security Strategy

(SNSA) and the deployment of the National Agricultural Investment Programme (PNIA).

This approach will allow all the actors to participate in the decision-making process and share responsibilities, to take charge of the highly sensitive issue of food security in Mauritania. It will also enable the State to refocus its investments and have access to more subsidies from different donors to deal with food insecurity, all the more so given that there is currently a lack of detailed information about food-insecure areas, the number of people affected, their geographical location and their socio-economic profile.

In this context, several networks of civil society organizations, agricultural federations, opinion leaders and imams recently promoted, at the invitation of the NGO SOS Abbere, a key initiative called "Alliance against Hunger in Mauritania". With the creation of this network against hunger and malnutrition, civil society has demonstrated a greater conscientious commitment to a social problem than ever before.

This alliance, which symbolizes national civil society's commitment to and involvement in the country's real development problems, is the embryo of a future national alliance against hunger in Mauritania, which will see the light as a joint effort on the part of the Mauritanian government, the FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Food Programme (WFP), Biodiversity International, and other parties involved in tackling the problem of hunger in our country. Based on this new extension of the fight against hunger, this alliance will raise hope and help to achieve this noble goal which is so crucial for national and world stability.

Mauritania's CSOs think that the factors which contribute to the persistence of hunger and malnutrition, as well as to worsening poverty, lie mainly in:

- an inadequate institutional environment and regulatory framework
- a lack of organization and structuring of productive sectors
- a lack of appreciation of national resources
- the poor quality of education and food behaviours
- injustice and lack of equality
- citizens' low purchasing power
- the absence of job opportunities
- a lack of independent specialized structures to support the State's efforts in the fight against hunger
- the absence of an independent national platform of consensus and decision-making involving the participation of all parties concerned.

These factors encourage the political leaders, national CSOs, people of good will, leading figures, opinion leaders and imams who aspire to a sustainable development

and genuine social justice to immediately share their skills and resources within the framework of the fight against hunger in Mauritania.

In this respect, the parties concerned, including the national NGOs, are currently exploring the best lines of financing for the activities of the PNIA programme within the Strategic Framework of the Fight against Poverty (CSLP in French), the Business Meeting, the NEPAD, and other innovative initiatives.

Thus, some new lines are currently being considered with a view to prioritizing food accessibility for the most vulnerable populations, and especially the "cash & voucher" programmes that would guarantee the Mauritanian population better food while also benefiting the domestic markets.

This approach, which is helping to consolidate other existing programmes such as "Food for Work" (VCT in French), seeks to increase the purchasing power of the beneficiaries, especially in rural areas, by ensuring their financial autonomy through a range of small-scale environmental projects, such as the planting of acacia trees for the production of gum arabic, sand dune fixation and the execution of irrigation channels. Some of these programmes particularly focus on agro-pastoral systems. Likewise, the professionalization of existing agricultural sectors (rice, sorghum, niébé-caupí beans) would allow the WFP to buy locally instead of resorting to the international markets.

This new dynamism in the field of international aid raises hope for the country, since in addition to traditional donors (OECD), Arab countries are becoming increasingly involved in providing aid for the fight against food insecurity in Mauritania, at a time when the contributions of traditional donors have begun to decrease. The idea of involving the productive industrial sector, and especially the extractive industries, in the fight against food insecurity is also gaining ground. Talks on the issue have been held, and this eventuality could give rise to a better redistribution of wealth among the country's citizens; at least this is what the WFP would recommend to the country's authorities. In fact, it would be immoral for businesses to continue to prosper while the native population continues to go hungry.

### **Conclusion:**

In the current context of food price volatility and agro-food deficit, Mauritania is unlikely to achieve the first Millennium Development Goal (eradicate hunger and extreme poverty).

### **Recommendations:**

- Carry out regular updates of information relating to market prices, food availability, the locust infestation situation and the RVF epidemic.
- Monitor Senegalese and Malian cross-border grain flows (rice, millet and sorghum).

- Make scenario forecasts regarding the evolution of the food situation over the next three years in the most vulnerable areas and, if necessary, assess possible needs (EFSA14) arising from the phenomenon of rampant inflation and its effect on food and hydrocarbon prices.
- Take measures for the procurement of inputs with the aim of improving production in the short and medium term, identifying the most vulnerable recipients and determining input needs in order to improve production conditions during the upcoming crop year.
- Continue to implement strategic development actions relating to food security/nutrition in the country (education, rural development, health-nutrition, employment).
- Mobilize financial resources and coordination systems in order to cope with a possible deterioration of the food situation of the most vulnerable populations during the period of transition.
- Reinforce actions aimed at alleviating food crisis situations: cash-for-work, food-for-work, selling basic products at modest prices, grain banks / SAVS, various targeted distributions, etc., in food-insecure areas during the period of transition.
- Reinforce prevention and aid-oriented actions aimed at undernourished under-five children and pregnant and breastfeeding women in risk areas.
- In the medium term, and with the help and support of the actors involved, undertake an analytical survey on the causes of malnutrition, at least in *wilayas* with steadily increasing malnutrition rates and in regions where the prevalence of malnutrition remains unchanged.
- Restructure the mechanisms for crisis management and intervention in national catastrophe situations, in order to promote the involvement of NGOs in the process of devising and implementing the corresponding policies.
- Speed up the process of validating the new National Food Security Strategy (SNSA) and its action programme (PNIA) in order to meet the challenges relating food insecurity for the period 2015-2030.