



## **Migration Profile**

### **MAURITANIA**

#### **A. Executive Summary**

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is a desert country, with vast areas for grazing and only 0.5% of the land is good for cultivation. It is the fourth least densely populated country in Africa, with a density of 3.9 inhabitants per square kilometre, and more than 55% of the population lives in urban areas<sup>i</sup>. Mauritania experienced a real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of 5.9% in 2019, but the global effect of the Covid-19 pandemic caused for the real GDP to contract by 3.6% in 2020<sup>ii</sup>.

In 2019, the Human Development Index (HDI) value for Mauritania was 0.546, positioning the country at the 157th place out of 189 countries, in the low human development category<sup>iii</sup>. 22.1% of people lives in poverty, and 9.8% of children suffers from acute malnutrition<sup>iv</sup>. The unemployment rate in 2020 was 10.6%. Although iron ore contributes heavily to the country's export (38%), agriculture remains the main source of revenue in Mauritania (50%), as well as livestock in rural areas<sup>v</sup>.

Mauritania is a destination and transit country in the sub-Saharan region and has been hosting refugees, mainly coming from Mali. In December 2019, the government of Mauritania at the Global Refugee Forum decided to adopt a national asylum legislation, giving access to refugees into the labour market, including them in the national health system, and issuing birth certificates to refugee children<sup>vi</sup>.

#### **B. Country profile**

##### **I. Background information**

Mauritania is a western African nation, surrounded by Algeria in the northeast, Mali in the east and southeast, Senegal in the southwest, western Sahara in the northwest, and the North Atlantic Ocean in the southwest. About three-quarter of Mauritania is covered by the Sahara Desert, and its total surface area is 1,030,700 sq. km<sup>vii</sup>, with a population of about 4.6 million people<sup>viii</sup>. The country has three ethnic groups, Black Moore (40%), White Moore (30%), and Sub-Saharan Mauritians (30%)<sup>ix</sup>. Its national and official language is Arabic, and other national languages include Pular, Soninke, Wolof, and French. Mauritania is an Islamic Republican State with Islam as the main religion (more than 99%)<sup>x</sup>. The other religious groups

together are less than 1%. The government system includes a President as the head of state and the Prime Minister as the head of government.

## **II. Internal and International Migration**

Approximately 56.1% of the population in Mauritania lives in urban areas<sup>xi</sup>, and the 2020-25 estimates suggest that the country's annual rate of urbanization will be around 3.84%<sup>xii</sup>. The key drivers of rural-urban migration in Mauritania are the loss of livelihoods and frequent droughts in rural areas. About one-fourth of its population lives in Nouakchott, the capital and the largest city in Mauritania<sup>xiii</sup>.

Mauritania is a destination and transit country for Sub-Saharan migrants. There is no recent data available regarding the total number of immigrants living in Mauritania. However, IOM states that in 2020 more than 32,000 migrants were living in the second-largest city (Nouadhibou), with more than three-quarters of them coming from Senegal and Mali<sup>xiv</sup>. Because of its strategic location that connects the country to the Mediterranean Sea, Mauritania is considered a gateway to Europe by some irregular migrants, fleeing from unemployment and poverty. In addition, a stricter border control in Morocco and Spain (Ceuta and Melilla) has forced migrants to look for alternative routes, making the port city of Nouadhibou the main transit area for migrants trying to reach Europe<sup>xv</sup>. Other irregular migrants also live in the city because of the challenges encountered while crossing the Atlantic Ocean, like the increase of control and travel barriers. Also, since mid-October 2020 about 400 migrants were intercepted or rescued off the coast of Mauritania<sup>xvi</sup>. Most of the migrants using this route come via Senegal, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, and Mali<sup>xvii</sup>.

In 2015-2020 the net migration rate in Mauritania stood at -0.9%, a setback considering that in 2015 it was the 3.4% of its total population<sup>xviii</sup>, and migrant women were 41.9%<sup>xix</sup>.

## **III. Emigration and Skilled Migration**

In 2019, Mauritians living abroad were about 128,506, and the emigrant stock was 2.84% in the same year. The 5 top destination countries for Mauritians were Senegal (46,518), Mali (23,331), France (19,563), Ivory Coast (12,661), and Spain (8,781).

There is no recent data available about the number of skilled Mauritians living abroad. With regards to brain drain in Africa, in 2021 Mauritania had a 6.5 index point which is above the world average (5.25), based on 173 countries<sup>xx</sup>. The country is ranked 103 and 129 out of 138 countries, respectively in its capacity to retain and attract skills<sup>xxi</sup>. In Mauritania there is a demand for skilled and semi-skilled labour in agriculture, agribusiness, and the tertiary sectors<sup>xxii</sup>.

## **IV. Forced Migration (internally displaced, asylum seekers, refugees, and climate-displaced people)**

Within the Sahel region, Mauritania is considered a "safe haven" for refugees<sup>xxiii</sup>, whom mainly UNHCR and its partners are giving protection and assistance to. In 2021, there were 76,212 registered refugees and asylum-seekers in the country, coming from Mali (72,876), the

Central African Republic (745), Côte d'Ivoire (492), Syria (461), Senegal (288), and others (1,350)<sup>xxiv</sup>. Many refugees come from Mali because of the current political instability in their country. Refugees and asylum seekers in Mauritania live either in the Mbera camp or in the urban areas of Dakhlet Nouadhibou, Hodh Ech Chargui, Nouakchott, Bassiknou, Fassala Néré, and Néma. In line with the commitment made during the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019, Mauritania, with the collaboration of UNHCR and partners in the education field, provides primary, secondary, and tertiary education for refugee children. For example, as of 2020-2021, refugee children have been increasingly admitted to the national public schools and the health system; also, in the deployment of Inaya the government allowed the Mbera camp to be covered by the national health system<sup>xxv</sup>. Furthermore, in a move to let eligible refugees benefit from the assistance under the National Social Protection Programme, the government of Mauritania intends to include refugee households in the National Social Registry<sup>xxvi</sup>.

The sole driver of internal displacement in Mauritania is natural disasters. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), in 2020 in the country there were 1,600 internally displaced persons<sup>xxvii</sup>, all resulting from heavy rainfall in the southeast region of Hodh Ech Chargui. This caused flooding in the cities of Bassiknou, Adel Bagrou, Amourj, and Néma, affecting 9,282 people from 1,380 households<sup>xxviii</sup>. Several people were left homeless and found refuge in host families, sheds, or other damaged houses.

## **V. Victims of Human Trafficking**

Mauritania is a Tier 2 country and does not entirely meet the minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking, despite its efforts to pursue it. Multiple factors cause human trafficking activity, ranging from the old customary tradition of slave ownership, poverty, and administrative inadequacies. Descendants of the traditional slave castes in the Haratin (Black Moor) and Afro-Mauritanian (Halpulaar, Soninke, and Wolof) communities are bound to the hereditary slave practices rooted in the ancestral master-slave relationships. They are often forced to work without pay as cattle herders and domestic servants<sup>xxix</sup>. Child labour is also a form of human trafficking in Mauritania - especially among children of slave descent (Halpullar), as they are forced to fulfil dangerous agricultural tasks, like herding cattle and goats<sup>xxx</sup>.

Steps have been taken to overcome the problem, for instance the establishment of courts to abolish such practices; however, adjudication is slow, because of inadequate resources and proper training. Furthermore, corrupt marabouts force boys from low-income families and children with disabilities to be placed under their control to beg on the streets<sup>xxxi</sup>. Because of poverty, traffickers lure especially vulnerable women and girls from traditional slave castes and Afro-Mauritanian communities with the promise of providing them with shelter and education, only to force them into domestic servitude in large cities, such as Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, and Rosso<sup>xxxii</sup>.

As a transit route to Europe, Mauritanian, Nigerian, and Senegalese traffickers in the port of Nouadhibou exploit Sub-Saharan African migrants into forced labour and sex trafficking<sup>xxxiii</sup>.

Also, because of poverty and the inability of meeting their daily needs, refugees are forced into prostitution even in their camp.

More than 50% of Mauritanian children under the age of 5 does not have birth certificates, which is a prerequisite for enrolment into secondary schools, and this means that they are out of school and it increases their chance of being victims of human trafficking<sup>xxxiv</sup>.

## **VI. National Legal Framework**

Several laws handle emigration and immigration issues in Mauritania. For example, Decree 62-169 of 1962 regulates the issuance of visas and travel permits. Decree 65-110 of 1965 amending Decree 64-169 on the immigration regime, Law No. 65-046 of 1965 on criminal law provision relating to the immigration system<sup>xxxv</sup>, and the 2020 law on the prevention and punishment of trafficking in person, which criminalizes sex trafficking and labour trafficking<sup>xxxvi</sup>.

Mauritania is a signatory to several international conventions.

At the regional level, since 2000 Mauritania is no longer a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and therefore forfeits its privilege of the free movement of nationals of member states. Mauritania has sealed bilateral agreements with Senegal, the Gambia, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and Niger which allows nationals of these countries to enter Mauritania without a visa for 90 days<sup>xxxvii</sup>. Mauritania also signed a bilateral agreement with Côte d'Ivoire in 2014, which exempts Ivoirians from the residence permit requirements<sup>xxxviii</sup>. At the international level, Mauritania is a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, while at continental level it also signed the 1969 AU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugees Problems in Africa. Mauritania is also a member of the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention).

Beyond the continent, Mauritania is a signatory to the 1990 Convention on the Protection of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Family, the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

## **VII. Main Actors**

### *The State*

The key ministries responsible for migration-related issues in Mauritania are the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, the Ministry of Employment, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Development. The Ministry of the Interior is responsible for designing, coordinating, and implementing plans and strategies related to migration. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation maintains a strong connection with the diaspora and encourages remittances. The Ministry of Employment manages issues related to labour migration. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Development designs, coordinates, and monitors the implementation of the government's economic and social policy. Mauritania

does not have a national asylum system in place, and therefore UNHCR looks after the registration of asylum seekers and the determination of their refugee status<sup>xxxix</sup>.

### *International Organisations*

Two international organisations are involved in migration-related issues in Mauritania. UNHCR is mostly involved in refugee management, and IOM assists the government with migration management-related concerns. In addition to leading and coordinating the humanitarian response for refugees in close collaboration with authorities and its partners, UNHCR also aimed at securing durable solutions for refugees in Mauritania. Other organizations include the World Food Programme (WFP), which provides food supplies to vulnerable and crisis-affected people, UNICEF provides food supplies and protection to vulnerable children, OXFAM amongst other things promotes the respect of rights of marginalised segments of society, particularly women and youth, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) works in the area of restoring family links between Malian refugees and their families.

### *NGOs and Other Organisations*

Several organisations and NGOs present in Mauritania advocate for the rights of migrants. The *Association Mauritanienne des Droits de l'Homme* (AMDH) works with refugees and other displaced people in collaboration with UNHCR in the area of advocacy. The *Association pour la Lutte contre la Pauvreté et le Sous-Développement* (ALPD) helps with the registration of refugees and offers protection and assistance for asylum seekers and migrants. *Sante Sans Frontieres* provides medical and health assistance to refugees, including sensitisation, screening, care, delivery of free medication and bed nets.

### *The Catholic Church*

The Catholic Church has one diocese, the Diocese of Nouakchott, with a membership of less than 0.5% of the total population<sup>xl</sup>. The non-Muslim community is almost exclusively non-Mauritanian. Despite its small fellowship, the Catholic Church is present in many humanitarian efforts through its religious organisations.

Founded in 1972, Caritas Mauritania operates in the country, assisting vulnerable people and supporting local structures such as women cooperatives, associations and emergent and informal structures. At the same time, Caritas Mauritania has developed different projects targeting food security, communities' integration and local people's access to income-generating activities. The commitment to assist migrants, refugees and asylum seekers includes a social protection mechanism for them through two specific programmes: *Accueil-Ecoute* in Nouakchott and *Caritas Paroissiale* in Nouadhibou. These programmes intervene in the promotion of women (literacy and support for pregnant migrants), job-seeking and integration in the workplace, professional trainings (from accounting to cooking courses), humanitarian assistance, hygienic relief, and raising awareness about the risks of migration. Both *Accueil-Ecoute* and *Caritas Paroissiale* work in the framework of reception-listening,

accompaniment, and improvement of the living conditions of migrants trying to foster respect for the dignity and better social integration of migrants and refugees in the country.

CRS (Catholic Relief Services) is active in Mauritania in the areas of improving food, nutrition, and resilience to vulnerable families, including refugees and internally displaced persons suffering from food crises. CRS and Caritas assisted 5,000 extremely vulnerable households suffering from food insecurity in the Brakna region through short term programmes, such as providing food aid, medical and agricultural supplies, and through long term programmes like education (where human capital is developed), natural resource management (through initiatives that promote agricultural sustainability), and peacebuilding (through initiatives that promote justice through peace and reconciliation)<sup>xli</sup>. Thanks to these programmes, communities can restore agricultural livelihoods and generate additional income. CRS also provides literacy and professional training to Mauritanian youth in areas such as auto mechanics, electrical engineering, small business development, welding/metalwork, carpentry, and hairdressing.

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<sup>i</sup> The World Bank, 2021

<sup>ii</sup> African Development Bank Group, 2021

<sup>iii</sup> Human Development Report, 2020

<sup>iv</sup> World Food Programme, 2021

<sup>v</sup> Skuad, 2022

<sup>vi</sup> UNHCR, 2021c

<sup>vii</sup> CIA – World Factbook, 2021

<sup>viii</sup> The World Bank, 2021

<sup>ix</sup> CIA – World Factbook, 2021

<sup>x</sup> Ibid

<sup>xi</sup> Index Mundi, 2021

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid

<sup>xiii</sup> Maastricht Graduate School Governance, 2017

<sup>xiv</sup> IOM, 2020a

<sup>xv</sup> El-Bekay, 2020

<sup>xvi</sup> IOM, 2020b

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid

<sup>xviii</sup> IOM, 2022

<sup>xix</sup> Ibid

<sup>xx</sup> The Global Economy, 2021

<sup>xxi</sup> Sawahel, 2017

<sup>xxii</sup> Ibourk, 2020

<sup>xxiii</sup> UNHCR, 2020

<sup>xxiv</sup> UNHCR, 2021a

<sup>xxv</sup> Ibid

<sup>xxvi</sup> UNHCR, 2021b

<sup>xxvii</sup> IDMC, 2021

<sup>xxviii</sup> International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2021

<sup>xxix</sup> US Department of State, 2021

<sup>xxx</sup> US Department of Labour, 2020

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xxx<sup>i</sup> Us Department of State, 2021

xxx<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

xxx<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

xxx<sup>iv</sup> Ibid

xxx<sup>v</sup> IOM, 2019

xxx<sup>vi</sup> US Department of State, 2021

xxx<sup>vii</sup> Ibourk, 2020

xxx<sup>viii</sup> Ibid

xxx<sup>ix</sup> UNHCR, 2021

x<sup>i</sup> The Association of Religion Data Archives. n.d.

x<sup>ii</sup> CRS, 2021