



Evaluation of the European Union's Cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (2014-2020)

Executive Summary

October 2021

Evaluation conducted on behalf of the European Commission

Top photo: Fishing market on Mauritanian shores, decent employment and sustainable artisanal fishing in Mauritania supported by the programme (Promopêche).

Middle photo: Women's workshop, in a neighbourhood of Nouakchott, on the prevention of violent radicalisation funded under the "Projet d'appui de la prévention à la radicalisation violente en Mauritanie" (CORIM).

Photo bottom left: Health care staff at the Dar Naim health centre, operational area of the programme (AI-PASS).

Bottom middle photo: Woman in a rural area outside Nouakchott.

Photo bottom right: Rosso road financed under the project "Reconstruction works of the Nouakchott-Rosso road".



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This evaluation was commissioned by the Evaluation Unit of the
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The authors accept sole responsibility for this report, drawn up on behalf of the Commission of the European Union. The report does not necessarily reflect the views of the Commission or the authorities of the country concerned..

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Objectives and scope of the evaluation

The main objectives of the evaluation were to provide a *comprehensive and independent assessment* of the past and current cooperation of the European Union (EU) with the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (IRM), so to discern *key lessons* and to formulate *recommendations* in order to guide decision-makers at the European External Action Service and the Directorate-General for International Partnerships, on how to improve strategies, programmes, and the implementation of current and future interventions.

The evaluation covers all of the EU's development cooperation with the IRM from *2014 to 2020* and covers both financial and non-financial actions. The actions of other Directorates-General of the European Commission (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Trade, and Migration and Home Affairs) are analysed in terms of coordination and consistency with respect to development actions, within the framework of the integrated approach and the Humanitarian-Development nexus.

The evaluation focuses in particular on the priority *intervention sectors* identified in the National Indicative Programme (NIP) of the 11th European Development Fund (EDF) and is structured around the macro-sectors of governance, security, migration, and healthcare, as well as resilience and inclusive growth. The analysis also takes into account cross-cutting issues, such as gender equality, the environment, demography, or human rights ('human rights-based approach'), as well as other themes contributing to the success of the cooperation and the achievement of its objectives, including education and visibility.

Background

Bordering Senegal, Mali, Western Sahara and Algeria, Mauritania occupies a major strategic position with a pivotal role in several *regional and international dynamics*, such as migration and security. Following its independence in 1960, the IRM has experienced several authoritarian regimes. Its first democratic transition was accompanied by a modernised constitution establishing the principle of political alternation in 2007. This transition was only short-lived and the army quickly regained power. In 2019, the IRM nevertheless carried out its first relatively serene political alternation during the presidential elections.

Despite the *difficulties of the country's political situation* (issues with political representation, limited transparency and accountability of the institutions), the EU continued to provide it with considerable support through various instruments, mainly the EDF and the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, in parallel with the Fisheries Agreement, which also involved significant financial transfers. The country has also benefited from the Emergency Trust Fund for stability and the fight against the root causes

of irregular migration, and the phenomenon of internally displaced persons in Africa, created in 2015, in addition to several thematic budget lines such as the strengthening of civil society organisations and local authorities, the environment, energy, and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. While EU support to the IRM has long been focused on improving the country's infrastructure, the 10th EDF marks a shift towards *cooperation more focused on strategic objectives* around good governance, regional integration, and the country's vital sectors (Millennium Development Goals, food security). The 11th EDF continues in this direction with priority sectors (Food Security and Sustainable Agriculture, Rule of Law, Healthcare) that reflect these strategic orientations.

Methodology

The evaluation was based on a theory of change and contribution analysis, which made it possible to examine the main causal chains while taking into account the specificities of- and changes in the context. The team has developed an analytical framework based on an evaluation matrix structured around *eight evaluation questions*, some of which apply transversely to the whole cooperation, and others relate to the effects of cooperation in macro-sectors. In addition to the documentary analysis, the analysis was based on semi-structured interviews. Despite the global pandemic, members of the evaluation team were able to visit the field, and some international experts worked in tandem with national experts on site.

Data collected during the evaluation

Four key regions (Assaba, Guidimakha, Nouadhibou, and Trarza) and around ten municipalities were visited for direct observations on numerous interventions in different sectors.

More than 1,000 documents were reviewed regarding the different sectors of intervention in Mauritania, in addition to extensive documentation on individual interventions, and more than 50 websites searched.

More than 220 people were interviewed in Brussels and Mauritania, such as European officials, project managers and members of project teams, representatives of civil society, representatives of EU Member States, representatives of national institutions, and other actors. On average, 40 interviews were conducted per sector of analysis. In total, more than 90 Mauritanian actors were interviewed.

12 focus groups organised with individuals who directly and indirectly benefited from the various interventions, as well as with certain civil society organisations.



Conclusions

The 13 main findings of the evaluation were grouped below into three categories.

The policy orientations

C1. EU-Mauritania cooperation has sometimes covered very broad sectors (governance, inclusive and sustainable growth) as well as multiple key areas of intervention. It has played a decisive role in the formulation and implementation of national sectoral strategies in several sectors, as well as in the development of the country.

During the evaluation period, non-traditional donors grew in importance in Mauritania. However, the EU remained the main donor in several key sectors, including governance, security, migration, and fisheries. Most of the support has combined different levels and complementary areas of intervention, and multi-actor partnership (public, private, civil society, other TFPs), with responses to more immediate issues targeting different types of vulnerabilities. EU support has played a decisive role in the formulation and implementation of certain sectoral strategies which have helped to improve the structuring of these various key sectors for the country's development. Education could not be prioritised by the EU and its partners during the evaluation period, but the sector has become particularly relevant for the current 2021-2027 programming.

C2. The evolution of the intervention strategy, which was initially directed towards structuring support, has not followed a clear single strategic framework in recent years, and the focus on the institutional dimension, despite its interest, has revealed its limitations.

The interventions within the EDF framework, which constituted the largest part of the support in the cooperation sectors, had structuring activities and were part of a logic of partnership with the State, with a strong institutional strengthening component. Overall, the results of this institutional support were limited at the operational level because of the governance challenges specific to Mauritania. The added value of close partnerships at the central level remains essential, however, too much externalisation of support to compensate for the difficulties of state projects presents risks. The evolution of the EU financing instruments used in Mauritania, in particular the use of Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) and the introduction of the Emergency Trust Fund (ETF), made it possible to respond partly to immediate risks with cyclical and structural determinants. However, the diversity of the instruments implemented concomitantly with the EDF was not made within a single and integrated strategic framework. Moreover, despite complementarities within the portfolio of EU interventions, the structuring of cooperation by sector, rather than around

medium/long-term multi-sectoral objectives, has contributed to inducing a silo approach.

C3. The context parameters have been taken into account at varying degrees, with projects dedicated to youth and supporting the advancement of women, as well as efforts to support comparatively innovative approaches, sometimes having experienced difficulties in the design and operationalisation.

In some sectors, cooperation has been based on sectoral diagnostics in concert with the various actors in the sector. However, this has not been systematic in all sectors. In several cases, the formulation of sectoral support was too external, based on international approaches or an external vision, without real involvement and commitment of the Mauritanian authorities and civil society at the national and local levels. Thus, several specificities of Mauritania have been insufficiently taken into account in EU support, in particular the role of Arab culture and links with both Arab countries and West Africa. Furthermore, the particularity of the country's increasingly multi-ethnic demographic structure and the related political issues have not always been clearly analysed and integrated into the support provided, regardless of the sector of intervention. However, the theme of youth has been receiving increased attention, manifesting itself in some recent EU support. In addition, gender issues have been promoted by the EU in certain sectors with targeted actions.

C4. Some support has involved several countries or regional institutions, but the regional dimension has only been partially addressed by EU-Mauritania cooperation.

EU regional support (ETF and IcSP in particular) often consisted of country components implemented in silos. The integration of interventions in Mauritania into an overall regional strategy is unclear. Indeed, synergies between the EU's strategy and the cooperation projects with Mauritania and its neighbouring countries have been infrequent.

The operational dimension

C5. The implementation of the cooperation strategy was confronted by important issues of partnership and ownership.

EU support came up against important issues of ownership, involvement, and communication with the authorities, both at the national and local levels. The partnership underlying the cooperation strategy was not truly operational due to several factors: the cumbersome administrative procedures, and the architecture of complex and ambitious projects, as well as the evolution of the mode of financing towards direct management without sufficiently explaining the reasons to national partners, and without anticipating the importance of their involvement in all stages of the intervention.



C6. At the global level, and for certain projects, the management of the cooperation strategy has remained very general. This is linked to a broad definition of objectives and tools which do not allow the monitoring of precise indicators and effects, preventing effective systemisation.

The cooperation objectives set at the beginning of the programming cycle, covering a seven-year period, were not linked to specific intermediate objectives allowing the chain of expected effects to be monitored. The strategy was broken down into an annual action plan for interventions financed by the NIP, and did not foresee being transcribed into an overall action plan comprising all the support financed by the various EU instruments, nor the actions of the Member States. The complementarity between the actions to achieve effects, therefore, remained poorly documented, whereas the interventions were carried out gradually to take into account the evolution of the degraded context of the Sahel at the same time. In addition, monitoring of effects and impacts has been relatively limited. The lack of an overall tool for steering cooperation results has complicated the consolidation and visibility of the effects of the support. This fragmentation was replicated at the level of certain beneficiary structures with distinct 'project' logics but no consolidated monitoring of the effects, for example in the sectors of justice, migration, security, or employment. These issues in monitoring also stemmed from the limits of human resources within the structures of the EU involved, and of the state partners.

C7. Despite the absence of joint programming, exchanges and synergies with the Member States were regular, but without full strategic capitalisation of the comparative advantages of each. They have gradually become implementing partners for the EU, reducing their bilateral cooperation.

There were many synergies between the EU and the Member States. However, the comparative advantages of each structure were not optimised within the framework of an overall strategy and action plan, and with formalised joint programming. The growing role of cooperation agencies in the implementation of support created new political challenges, as well as issues concerning access to funds with accountability of Member States towards the EU, which was in fact not effective. There was no real framework for the role of the Member States in identifying and implementing EU projects. This contributed to the development of opportunistic approaches, sometimes neither very strategic nor effective, as well as to the multiplication of actors working on the same subject. At another level, bilateral funding from some Member States has been declining. These tended to defer back to the EU, which therefore became essential in many sectors in order to address the contextual vulnerabilities. The EU's added value was apparent through the level of its committed amounts, broad multi-sectoral

coverage, and its ability to bring together different types of actors.

C8. Significant investments were made by the EU to support coordination and national approaches, but their effectiveness has been undermined by the absence of real national supervision, and the lack of participation of non-traditional donors in the coordination frameworks implemented.

EU support was part of national development frameworks and strengthened the coordination of actors in most sectors, even if this was not always formalised and remained complicated in sectors that were nevertheless key (resilience, inclusive and durable growth, security). State services played a limited role in coordinating TFPs. The most important actors on the financial level (Gulf countries in particular) were absent from these frameworks, although they intervened significantly in the country. Certain modes of cooperation were tested, in a relatively marginal way, via third countries such as Morocco or Tunisia.

Sectoral conclusions

C9. Governance and the rule of law: EU support has contributed in varying ways to improving governance and the rule of law, in particular with significant contributions to the protection of human rights and the emergence of credible civil society actors and public finance reform.

The EU has contributed to several significant advances, notably with the credibility of the electoral process which led to the first peaceful political changeover in Mauritania. Support for decentralisation and local development did not have the expected effects in the absence of a real political will, and because of a certain resistance from the administration, in particular for the real transfer of skills and resources to local communities to enable them to deliver local public services. The various supports to the justice sector have also contributed to the development and adoption of a sectoral policy for the sector, but its implementation remains at the primary stage. Structuring support for civil society has made it possible to assist their advocacy for the improvement of their working environment. However, the end of specific support for civil society in the geographic area has reduced the EU's scope for interaction with Mauritanian civil society. Regarding the promotion and protection of human rights, the EU has significantly contributed to the care of victims of gender-based violence through grants to NGOs and their local partners. Nevertheless, sustainability problems remain.

C10. Security: The EU has provided significant and innovative support to the security sector, in particular to government strategies on security and development, to the G5 Sahel regional approach, and to the prevention of radicalisation. The effects of the support on the security dynamics of the sub-region are not very visible at



this stage with the projects, at the national level, primarily targeting prevention.

EU security support under the EDF targeted security issues related to the isolation of certain areas already vulnerable before the Malian crisis of 2012. The project has evolved in part in support of the country's training structures, with long-term capacity building objectives, establishing units aimed at strengthening links with the population and control of the territory. EU support has not resulted in direct and operational targeting of security risks across the region, such as major cross-border trafficking or terrorist networks. The supervision of religious public discourse has been strengthened, as well as the prevention of radicalisation, based on actions by the authorities, albeit prior to the Malian crisis, therefore without working on the recent dynamics of radicalised groups. At the regional level, it was not possible to capitalise on the good results of the country's security management and for them to have an effect on the other G5 countries.

C11. Migration: The EU plays an essential role in the management of migration in Mauritania and the structuring of cross-border migratory flows, with results mainly in terms of security. On the other hand, the economic potential of the phenomenon is not optimised and direct improvements in terms of protection of migrants' rights are still limited.

The EU has contributed to strengthening the consideration of the migratory phenomenon in Mauritania, with the operational implementation of a strategy largely modelled on international standards. Given the complexity of the phenomenon in the Mauritanian context, the most visible support and results concerned the security dimension of the phenomenon, rather than the aspects related to governance, economy, protection, and access to basic services. The issues of migrants' rights have remained poorly targeted in relation to the level of needs, in particular for the populations most at risk and their primary needs during forced returns from the EU (Canary Islands). The migration issue remains poorly integrated into the country's development planning (SCAPP¹), including from a regulatory perspective. However, the recent progress of the legal framework, as well as the commitment by the authorities to the development/updating of documents to improve the management and governance of migration, are nevertheless a positive sign and an opportunity to sustain the efforts to dismantle networks and support the victims of trafficking and smuggling.

C12. Healthcare: EU support has helped to improve the healthcare sector governance and the equitable accessibility to essential healthcare services in a sustainable manner - and in so doing, to respond to the new pandemic situation.

The EU has supported key healthcare sector governance reforms as well as basic healthcare system strengthening activities. It is also one of the main partners to have supported the national financing strategy and the development of health insurance, as well as promoting the establishment and implementation of a common fund for universal healthcare coverage. These interventions produced lasting gains, given the strong ownership of this political objective at national, European, and international levels. In addition, the EU support has made it possible to increase the availability of essential and long-term healthcare services, and should also increase their financial accessibility. The utilisation rates of healthcare services have also increased significantly during the evaluation period. The EU has provided substantial support as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular in terms of protective equipment, training, and strengthening of the epidemiological surveillance system, which is now satisfactory. However, the response capacity to epidemic emergencies, and the operational capacity of healthcare services remain weak, as well as the availability of essential drugs and the quality of care, with further significant disparities in healthcare structures.

C13. Resilience, inclusive and sustainable growth: The EU has played a positive role in supporting the country's dynamic in terms of inclusive growth, against a backdrop of climatic hazards, institutional weaknesses, and regional insecurity. The effects of the support are mainly felt at the local level - in the intervention areas - and are still modest for some.

The EU has made 'Food and Nutrition Security, and Sustainable Agriculture' (FNSSA) the main focus area of the 11th EDF NIP. The cooperation strategy, targeted at both central and decentralised levels, was useful by associating governance, infrastructure, and structuring investments for agro-sylvo-pastoral sectors at the family and community levels. The EU has contributed to the growth and opening-up of the targeted rural areas, thanks to major structuring projects such as strategic roads (Rosso road) and a power plant, which improved the populations' access to electricity. The sustainability of the sectors has also been improved, but food and nutritional insecurity persists and lacks synergies with humanitarian aid. Technical and vocational training projects were also positive and aimed at synergies with promising sectors and the inclusion of women. Thanks to this relevance, the EU exercises leadership in this area, even if the number of training courses remains limited. However, the interventions experienced many delays and had to face multiple internal and external challenges, such as the difficulty of finding competent implementing partners, and a lack of consultation at the local level, as well as frequent institutional changes, which delayed some reforms and hardly facilitated national ownership. More recently, the

¹SCAPP: *Accelerated Growth and Shared Prosperity*



COVID-19 crisis and the ban on travel beyond regional borders have severely penalised many people who depend on seasonal migration for their basic needs. This has had consequences for agricultural, pastoral, and agri-food value chains, and those who depend on them.

Recommendations

R1. Establish and ensure systematic monitoring of a single cooperation strategy for the EU countries; this should be used to structure all the support provided in the country while integrating them within the framework of a regional approach.



R2. Improve the relevance to the context of the cooperation strategy with a dual institutional and local anchorage, including a stronger grassroots support component, and also including the formulation of realistic objectives, and the articulation of institutional support with operational results, taking into account the Arabic-speaking multicultural and linguistic complexity, demography, and the pursuit of specifically adapted innovative approaches.



R3. Strengthen the partnership with state structures at the various stages of the programming cycle.



R4. Consolidate coherence and synergies at the internal level for the convergence of interventions and the operationalisation of the nexus, as well as at the external level with Member States, TFPs, and non-traditional donors:



- **at the internal level:** between the sectors and the General Directorates with the EUDs of the border countries, to increase the operationalisation of the triple Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus through better identification and joint execution.
- **at the external level:** support capitalisation on the comparative advantages of Member States, continue efforts to ensure coordination, complementarity, and consistency of approaches with other TFPs and support the engagement of non-traditional donors around national strategies (with the support of the government and national actors).

R5. Strengthen monitoring mechanisms and adjust interventions to increase mutual accountability and efficiency, as well as to identify the consolidated effects of the strategy and further structure the involvement of the cooperation agencies of the Member States.



R6. Strengthen the professionalisation and credibility of civil society in strategic sectors, and extend the 'pilot' actions of territorial development, protection of human rights, socio-economic empowerment of women, empowerment and economic integration of young people, and support for public finance reforms.



R7. Strengthen the treatment of immediate security risks with an overall strategic framework, the targeting of cross-border flows and the convergence of national support from the various countries concerned.



R8. Promote a multi-sectoral and cross-border approach to migration, in conjunction with the economic development of the country and the strengthening of the rule of law, including taking into account the vulnerabilities of migrant populations and refugees.



R9. Consolidate achievements of the support programme in the healthcare sector in terms of partnership, support for structural reforms, and the pursuit of universal healthcare coverage according to its three main dimensions (supply, demand, and quality of care).



R10. Continue and strengthen the current value chain approach of projects in the sector of food and nutrition security and sustainable agriculture at central and decentralised levels, with a more efficient programmatic framework, and fully assume the leadership of the EU in this sector as well as the objective of transition to a green and blue economy.



R11. Foster opportunities for synergies and mutual 'win-win' levers between projects, in particular between funding in the 'food and nutritional security and sustainable agriculture' sector, and programmes for the sustainable management of natural resources, in particular land, stability, and the fight against the root causes of irregular migration and the phenomenon of displaced persons, and professional integration after technical and vocational training.

