

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Oxfam GB implemented a food aid and food security emergency intervention in Mauritania in 2003 in response to worsening food security following successive years of drought. Annual rains had failed in 2002 and this had followed freak storms which killed many livestock and damaged infrastructure in January 2002. One of the worst affected areas was Aftout a transition zone between the desert in the north and the more fertile agricultural areas along the Senegal River in the south. The Aftout region is inhabited by mixed communities of mostly "white moors" and "black moors" whose livelihood strategies are diverse but marginal. Most households rely on a combination of livestock, recession and rain-fed agriculture, migrant labour and trade. Even under normal conditions there are a high number of households considered food insecure or highly vulnerable and child acute malnutrition levels are high i.e. in the range of 10%.

Oxfam GB has had activities in Mauritania since 1983 and implemented an integrated development programme in the Affole zone east of Aftout up until 2000. When Oxfam left Affole some of the former staff were facilitated to form a local NGO, SLODA, which is now operating programmes in some parts of Affole as a partner of Oxfam. At the time of the drought Oxfam GB had a small office in the capital, Nouakchott, but was essentially non operational. The ongoing programmes in micro-credit, gender equality and advocacy were being implemented through partner organisations.

The Oxfam GB Regional Humanitarian Office in Dakar responded to worsening food security indicators from FEWS Net and the Mauritanian Government's own monitoring system (OSA) in September 2002. Oxfam's partner, SLODA, had also been reporting a worsening situation in Affole since January 2002. A food security advisor from the Dakar office carried out an assessment in September/October and on the strength of this an emergency programme was launched. The Regional team took into account the existing Oxfam GB capacity in Mauritania and decided to establish a separate emergency programme to address the food security problems in Aftout and Affole. The components of the programme in Aftout were implemented directly but the components in Affole were implemented through SLODA. The programme purpose was: *"To improve health and nutritional condition of people in vulnerable households in the target area and to support livelihoods"*. Planned outputs included meeting food needs through distribution of free food and supporting agricultural production. Drought recovery activities in livestock, agriculture and water were added in August 2003, following good rains, as part of the ongoing drought recovery programme.

The evaluation of the emergency and recovery programmes was undertaken in January 2004 by a team of consultants from Acacia Consultants in Kenya, partly in order to share lessons learnt from implementation of drought response activities in East Africa during the 1999/2001 drought. The team carried out extensive fieldwork including discussions and participatory analysis with beneficiaries of the Oxfam programme in both Aftout and Affole. Meetings with key national and regional stakeholders also helped to inform the assessment.

A summary of the effects and impacts of the programmes are presented in Chapter 4 and Lessons Learnt and Recommendations are outlined in Chapter 5 and 6 respectively. These concentrate on four related issues;

The selection of activities in an area with highly diversified livelihood strategies – As a classic emergency food intervention the Oxfam Mauritania programme was well done, but it may not have been the best way to support or protect livelihoods. The programme successfully delivered food to over 30,000 people and food genuinely reached vulnerable households for the first time but the quantities received made a relatively small contribution to household food needs over the year. There is some evidence that support to trade and

food purchasing through price subsidies or even cash payments, may have been more in line with households normal livelihood systems.

The programme had targeted market gardening as an activity done by women, which would provide benefits for households in terms of nutrition and income. As a long-term strategy this has some potential but support to vegetable gardening had no impact on the immediate food needs of vulnerable households at the height of the drought. The timing of inputs, shortage of water and difficulties in trying to introduce new techniques in new communities meant that production of vegetables in 2003 was not increased.

The evaluation found that support to cereal production from dam cultivation had limited impact on food security. Complicated social structures within communities mean that elites control land and frequently harvests. This means that marginalized households are unlikely to significantly benefit from improvements in production from dam cultivation.

Overall Oxfam's emergency programme was designed to replace lost agricultural production but not to protect or support livelihoods. Livelihood systems in Aftout had not been clearly understood by Oxfam staff at the beginning of the programme. The intervention was designed to provide food through free food distribution and increased agriculture but these were not the priority needs of the communities at the time. Agriculture (particularly dam cultivation) was an obvious strategy to support but in reality it contributes relatively little to household food security. Even the most frequently expressed and obvious needs, such as water, could not be met by the Oxfam programme until after the drought. The communities attributed the improvement in food security in Oct 2003 to improved livestock and rained agricultural production (following the rains) not to food relief or agricultural support. The diversified livelihood strategies of households in Aftout required more innovative approaches to really relieve drought stress in highly vulnerable families.

The advantages and disadvantages of operating within a separate emergency programme:

- A separate emergency programme, managed by food security specialists was the best way to deliver food to a highly vulnerable population at risk of famine. However it may not have been the best way to support or protect livelihoods. The establishment of a completely separate emergency programme operating in an area that Oxfam was not operational presented various difficulties. The Staff did not know Aftout or any of the communities so had to learn a lot at the beginning of the program. Existing human resources and experience within the development programme were limited and the emergency programme was seen as "separate" and not relevant to Oxfam's development priorities in Mauritania. If the emergency programme had operated in an area which Oxfam staff were more familiar with it would have been easier to implement and could have involved the development programme resources more.

The SLODA team understood the Affole communities and how the drought was affecting them better than the Oxfam team in Aftout. This enabled them to adjust the Oxfam emergency and mitigation programmes to better meet the needs of the drought affected communities (e.g. rapid distribution of pesticides in 2002/2003 and seeds in 2003). Their ongoing livelihood support activities such as loans to small enterprise inadvertently provided the most effective drought relief in many villages.

The importance of community empowerment

Black Moor communities in Aftout are considerably marginalized and removed from power. The programme directly targeted small villages with both food and agricultural inputs. Although the interventions themselves had a limited impact the communities gained a sense of worth from being considered for assistance for the first time. Communities felt that the endorsement of community-based committees by NGOs gave them a voice in deciding how inputs were allocated. This is a significant impact as it is the starting point for empowerment

and community development. Ultimately capacity building and empowerment may have more impact on reducing food insecurity than distribution of inputs..

Needs assessment and rapid response: - Pastoralism and water assessments contributed to understanding of problems at village level. The emergency programme included a provision for the assessments but had no plan, or funds to immediately implement the urgent measures recommended in the reports. The results of the assessments could have been used to carry out immediate interventions in water and livestock support which would have considerably relieved drought effects in 2003. At the same time food distributions, agricultural activities and post distribution monitoring all contributed to Oxfam's knowledge and understanding of communities in Aftout. This knowledge contributed to the better design of the subsequent recovery activities but came too late to influence the emergency programme design. Overall ineffective needs assessment and conventional assumptions about the basis for household food security contributed to the weak design of some components of the emergency programme.

It is recommended that the Oxfam Mauritania programme needs to move to a one programme approach in which the capacity to respond to drought emergencies is built into development activities. This programme should be based on a substantive livelihood assessment at village level. The programme capacity in strategic needs assessment, contingency planning and scaling up interventions should be developed. The details of this approach are outlined in the document "Oxfam Mauritania Country Programme Strategy".