



Mbera Camp

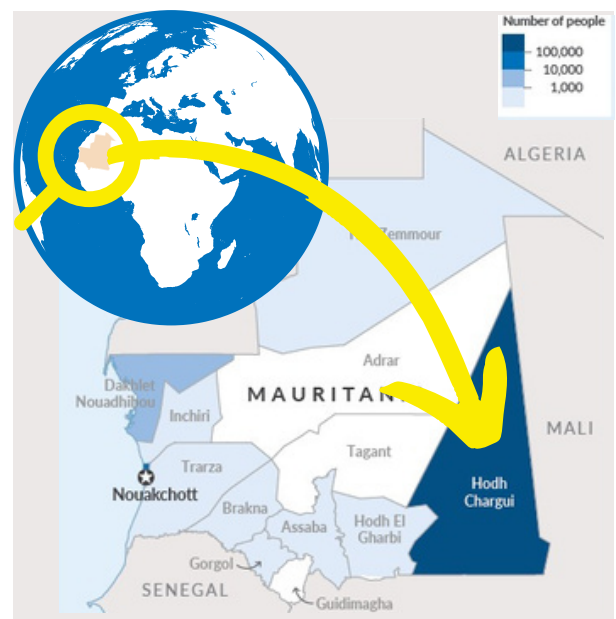
April 2025

Created in 2012, Mbera camp is currently home to more than 118,000 Malian refugees.

As of 31 December 2024, UNHCR further estimates that 154,000 individuals have settled out of the camp in the Hodh Chargui region.

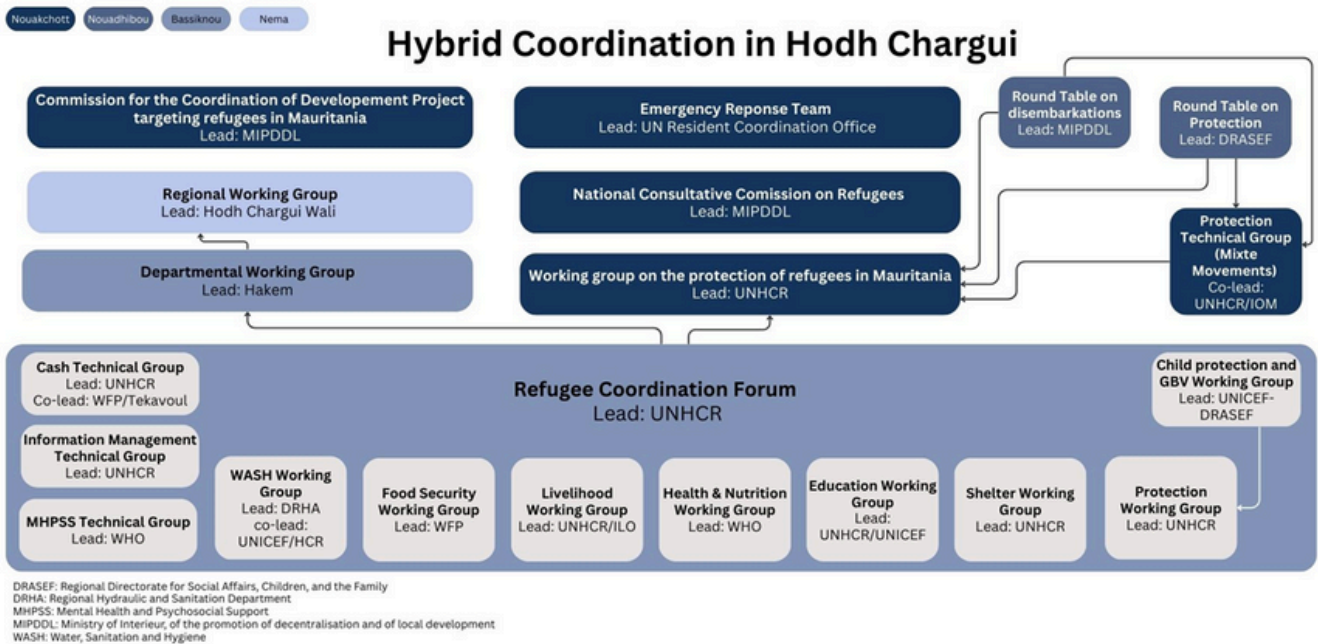
Among registered refugees, 47% are men and 53% women, while 55% are under 18.

As the security situation on the Malian side of the border remains volatile, no large-scale return is currently envisaged. With very limited resettlement places available, UNHCR continues to concentrate its efforts in refugees' inclusion in national systems and local integration.



Delivering & coordinating assistance and protection: Refugee coordination model in Mauritania

The coordination model in Hodh Chargui is designed to ensure effective and accountable responses to the refugee crisis. It emphasizes the need for a strong Government leadership, supported by a wide range of stakeholders. This collaborative approach brings together 39 members of the Refugee Coordination Forum, including UN agencies, international and local NGOs, NGO Platform, Mauritanian authorities' representatives. This framework promotes information sharing, resource optimization, and the development of comprehensive strategies that bridge emergency response with long-term development goals. This inclusive approach aims at enhancing the effectiveness and relevance of humanitarian and development initiatives in the Hodh Chargui Region.



Access to legal protection, community and basic services: The registration center

UNHCR's work in registration and data management is the foundation for protection and solutions for Malian refugees. Both in the camp and the out of the camp in the Hodh Chargui region, registration is carried out in partnership with the National Agency for Population Registration and SecureTitles (civil registry registration - ANRPTS). The worsening security situation in Mali has led to an increased influx of Malian refugees across the Malian-Mauritanian border into Mbera camp and host villages in Hodh Chargui.

In general, Mauritania maintains its generous open-door policy towards refugees and asylum seekers in need of international protection. However, constraints to freedom of movement in and outside Hodh Chargui region are increasing, with the travel restrictions imposed since April 2024 by the Mauritanian authorities on foreigners (including refugees) due to security concerns. UNHCR continues to advocate with government counterparts for the respect of refugee rights in accordance with international law.



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In addition, UNHCR has been in contact with local authorities and law enforcement to ensure that arrested refugees due to lack of documentation or restrictions of movement have access to legal aid provided by UNHCR and that refoulement can be prevented. UNHCR's legal assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers include legal advice and representation in court, awareness-raising and monitoring of detainees and their detention conditions.

Since January 2024, UNHCR has made significant progress in implementing a protection monitoring system aimed at identifying the needs of refugees settling out of Mbera camp (in 2024, the out-of-camp refugee population surpassed the number of refugees in Mbera camp), preventing rights violations, and promoting effective coordination among response actors. Additionally, the Population Flow monitoring, which started as a monthly exercise in 2024 and has now shifted to every two months, identifies population 69 localities (41 localities in Bassiknou axis and 28 in Nema axis).

Individual registration and documentation remain a critical protection tool, enabling freedom of movement, respect for family unity and access to services. UNHCR's registration system is based on the population flow monitoring and includes a protection assessment and biometric verification and enrolment of newly arrived refugees.



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The Biometric Identity Management System (BIMS) strengthens the integrity of refugee registration and identification operations. Registration and enrolment allow identification of specific needs and referral to relevant partners and inclusion in assistance and protection services, including health, education and nutrition. The registration and documentation processes are carried out jointly by UNHCR and the civil registry (Agence Nationale du Registre des Populations et des Titres Sécurisés - ANRPTS).

This hybrid system guarantees that cases are verified to prevent nationality fraud and that refugees have access to a National Identification Number (NIN), essential to facilitate their access to work, education, banking services and healthcare.

It also allows ANRPTS to issue refugees born in Mauritania with birth certificates. UNHCR's local legal partner, El insaniya, also work requests for suppletive judgments (in cases parents missed the deadline to register their newborn) and marriage certificates. Based on registration data, WFP and UNHCR identify beneficiaries for food and cash distributions (including IGAs) while UNICEF uses refugee data to plan education and child protection activities in and around the camp.

Access to livelihoods opportunities and economic inclusion

Mbera camp hosts a dynamic and diverse market that has grown significantly over the years. In 2015, a dedicated space was formalized to accommodate the local shops and commercial exchanges that had been developing informally. Today, the market boasts more than 500 shops and is managed by a Market Committee, composed by refugees and responsible for oversight of daily operations (shops allocation, cleanliness). A Merchants Association, composed by refugees, coordinates supply orders from Nouakchott and Mali.

Every Tuesday, merchants from various regions of Hodh Chargui gather at the Mbera market to engage in trade. The Mbera market is part of a regional trading circuit that rotates through different locations throughout the week (Fassala on Mondays, Mbera on Tuesdays, Aghor on Thursdays and Bassiknou on Saturdays).



Reflecting the growing economic activity generated by refugees, a Mauritanian bank established a branch in the camp in June 2023. Since then, 395 refugee accounts have been opened, significantly enhancing access to formal financial services and promoting financial inclusion.

In partnership with ACH (Action Against Hunger), UNHCR supports the development of income-generating activities and projects, primarily assisting refugees, but also host communities. This includes economic training and provision of seed capital to help individuals start their own business. In collaboration with Techghil (the National Employment Agency), UNHCR also provides vocational training and employment support for both refugees and national residents.

UNHCR further promotes market gardening activities through SOS Désert (a Mauritanian NGO). More than 1,100 farmers (80% of whom are women) are supported through training and provision of agricultural materials to boost their activities. In 2024, these efforts led to the harvest of 77.504 kg of vegetables, which was used for both family consumption and sale in the market.



Access to digital solutions: Mbera connectivity center

Created in 2019 with the support of UNHCR Connectivity fund, the center offers computer training courses on the basics of computer literacy to use connectivity as a tool to address key protection and information gaps that hinder self-reliance and professional development.

The center has received support from other actors, notably UNICEF, to strengthen existing programs. Currently managed by RET international the UNHCR partner, it enables refugees and locals to improve their digital skills and access online classes (e.g. massive open online courses—MOOCs by Coursera for refugees; trainings for teachers etc.) while weekly training sessions are targeting students and teachers.



The connectivity center is an instrument of peaceful cohesion between the young refugees and those of the host community who have access to it. In 2024, a total of 673 people benefited from the training services offered by the connectivity center, 91% of whom were refugees and 9% of the host population. Among them, 105 were teachers (26 women and 79 men), representing 16% of the total; 303 were students (110 girls and 193 boys), representing 45%; and 263 other beneficiaries (66 women and 197 men), representing 39%.

Access to education: primary and secondary schools

Education in Mbera camp follows the Malian curriculum and not the curriculum of the host country as in Niger and Burkina Faso. However, in 2023, with the assistance of IIEP-UNESCO and in accordance with the authorities, UNHCR led the creation of a budgeted plan for the inclusion of refugee children into the Mauritanian education system, aligning with the National Development Programme for Education Sector III (Programme Nationale du Développement du Secteur de l'Éducation III, PNDSE III).

This national strategy incorporates refugee inclusion as a core element of its 10-year plan. In 2025, building on this strategic direction, UNHCR and the Ministry of National Education and Reform of the Education System, developed a three-year roadmap for inclusion of refugees in the national education system to operationalize the 10-year programme by focusing on the gradual transition of the Malian to the Mauritanian curriculum in Mbera camp. These efforts led to the issuance of a circular by MERSE, instructing municipalities nationwide to guarantee refugee children's access to national schools.

To this day, despite its exceptional nature, Mbera camp's education system is under the supervision of the MERSE. Local education authorities provide technical support, supervision and pedagogical inspection of the education system in Mbera. There are currently eight (8) elementary schools with 8255 students (4254 boys and 4001 girls), and two (2) colleges/lycées with 715 students (429 boys and 286 girls). The education workforce is composed of 214 people, including 195 teachers and professors and 19 directors and deputy directors, most of them are refugees.



UNHCR and UNICEF have been coordinating the sector since 2012 (when the camp was established) and working closely with refugees who are actively involved in the management of education activities and other education partners through the Education Working Group. This collaborative approach aims to address persistent challenges, including low enrolment rates and limited resources, while paving the way for greater inclusion of refugee children in Mauritania's national education system. As a result of the humanitarian funding gap, UNICEF suspended the activities 22 preschool centers in the camp in 2024.

WFP also supports school canteens, while GIZ works with UNHCR through the joint project funded by BMZ, ProNexus, to improve data collection and governance to facilitate refugee inclusion in the national system.

The second phase of ProNexus (2024-2027) will provide support for the gradual transition of the school curriculum. These include the rehabilitation of schools to ensure a conducive learning environment, the provision of human resources to strengthen educational capacity, and effective communication with refugees and host communities. The aim is to promote school enrollment and retention, while also supporting the transition.

Access to healthcare: Mbera health center

Refugees living in Mbera camp access primary health services through 4 health facilities in the camp (1 health center and 3 health posts) managed by the Ministry of health in collaboration with the World Bank and UNHCR, and with support from WHO and UNFPA. Over the first quarter of 2025, a total of 45,198 new curative consultations, 468 first antenatal consultations, 350 deliveries, and 734 referrals to hospitals have been conducted by those facilities.

Respiratory tract infections remain by far the most frequent cause of morbidity among the population (21.1%) followed by digestive disorders (7.4%), cardiovascular diseases (4.6%) and acute diarrhea (4.5%). The above figures put a spotlight on the high demand for health care and the great effort of the Ministry of Health and partners to provide refugees with access to services.

However, the availability and the quality of health and nutrition services available are seriously threatened by current the humanitarian funding gap, putting the most vulnerable individuals at high risk of morbidity and mortality. An innovative project, launched in 2025 by UNHCR and the Ministry of Health and funded by the Sheika Fatma Foundation, has also been reducing costs of refugees' and host communities' access to healthcare through the provision of telehealth solutions (e.g. remote consultations with specialists in Nouakchott).



Empowering communities through community-based approaches: Discussions with refugees

Refugees in Mbera camp are organized under community-based structures, that enables them to express their needs, carry out projects and support humanitarian and development interventions through community mobilization. They are instrumental in ensuring engagement of the community and diffusion of information. A camp coordinator, the president and vice-president of women as well as eight female and male zone leaders and the Youth representative, compose the refugee coordination committee and help refugees in resolution of their daily issues.

They work closely with the camp management units and different partners. Equally important are the 30 specialized community-based structures (education, child protection, GBV, WASH, environment, fire brigades, blood donors etc.) that allow an effective community-based approach through regular communication with communities, feedback mechanisms and promotion of bottom-up initiatives.





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For instance, SOS Nomade and Femmes Ressources, two refugee-led organizations, have created the first safe spaces for children and women in the camp. This has encouraged various partners to reinforce their support towards these associations who can provide creative and sustainable solutions for challenges facing their communities. The successful opening and management of the Klabu clubhouse (a sports library and space) in Mbera Camp, demonstrates how refugees, if given the opportunity, can be agents of change and strategic partners of humanitarian organizations.

ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT

UNHCR is intensifying its climate action and sustainable energy interventions in Mbera refugee camp and surrounding host communities in Hodh Chargui, one of the most climate-vulnerable regions in the Sahel. These efforts contribute to improved service delivery, natural resources protection, and the resilience of both refugee and host populations.

Following the successful completion of the solarization of UNHCR's operational offices and guesthouse, the solarization of all schools in the camp is now underway. Each classroom will be equipped with lighting, a fan, and a socket improving learning conditions and enabling digital education.

In parallel, all health posts and the health centre are being equipped with upgraded solar systems to ensure reliable electricity for essential medical services. UNHCR's two-pronged solarization approach focuses both on critical infrastructure (schools, health facilities, boreholes) and operational facilities, significantly reducing reliance on fossil fuels while cutting operational costs. Additionally, the "Cash for Gas" initiative has reached nearly 1,500 households since 2022, helping families transition from firewood to LPG and reducing environmental degradation and health risks.

Complementary efforts include the restoration of over 45 hectares of degraded land through tree planting and productive use such as market gardening with support of SOS Desert (Mauritania NGO). These initiatives are coupled with reforestation (over 69,000 trees planted), bushfire prevention by the Fire Brigade (2022 Nansen Award Regional Winner), and training in green livelihoods. Looking ahead, if resources are available, the introduction of drip irrigation could represent a next step to scale up food security, land restoration, and livelihoods.



WASH/ENVIRONMENT

Access to clean water and sanitation remains a major challenge for newly arrived populations and host communities in Hodh Chargui. Many displaced families settle in villages offering water access, especially those with boreholes. However, in areas without this infrastructure, people rely on untreated wells, increasing the risk of waterborne diseases.

Water collection responsibilities typically fall on men, or on women and girls in their absence. Female-headed households face additional challenges due to long distances and lack of essential non-food items. Water scarcity also affects livestock. The drying of ponds and influx of animals have put immense pressure on available water sources. Inadequate infrastructure in some villages poses serious health risks, particularly for children. Sanitation and hygiene conditions remain therefore critical. Open defecation is widespread, and there is a severe shortage of latrines, showers, and waste management systems.

In 2024, significant WASH improvements were made in Mbera Camp: 300 latrines were rehabilitated for 9,000 people; water supply reached 15 liters per person per day, meeting emergency standards. Similarly solar systems were installed in pastoral wells, and WASH kits distributed to vulnerable households. In host areas like Fassala and Megve, 19 boreholes were built or rehabilitated (benefiting 52,000 people), and 142 latrines and showers served 23,600 people. In Ghlig Cheikhat, 2,677 people benefited from the rehabilitation of a drinking water system with photovoltaic panels.

Persistent gaps include limited water production, aging infrastructure, poor water point management, and underfunding, which delay interventions and limit beneficiary coverage. The postponed launch of the Moudoun project also impacted UNHCR's 2024 plans. Looking ahead, the Moudoun project, funded by the World Bank, will further boost WASH capacity through the construction of a water tower, a new borehole, and over 1,000 durable latrines.



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