

# Islamic Republic of Mauritania

## Oasis Sustainable Development Programme Project Performance Assessment

### Executive Summary

1. This report presents the findings of the Project Performance Assessment (PPA) of the Oasis Sustainable Development Programme (PDDO, *Programme de développement durable des oasis*) in Mauritania.
2. **Objectives.** The PPA sought to generate an overall evaluation of the programme's achievements with a view to drawing lessons and recommendations of potential validity for the design of future interventions in Mauritania and for improving the implementation of ongoing projects in the country.
3. **Methodology.** The evaluation was conducted in compliance with the guidelines of the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE) as regards the validation of project completion reports and PPAs. It included an in-depth study of the programme's completion report and other relevant documentation, as well as a visit to Mauritania during which the mission held meetings in the capital and in the project area. The purpose of the field visits was to verify the conclusions that had emerged from the desk study and thereby arrive at an independent assessment of the performance of PDDO. Due to the limited budget that IOE is able to allocate to PPAs, no statistical survey could be conducted. The judgements in this report are therefore based on information of an essentially qualitative nature.
4. **Work carried out for the PPA.** The PPA involved five stages: (i) preparation; (ii) field mission; (iii) report-writing and quality assurance; (iv) comments and revision; and (v) submission and distribution. The documents analysis carried out during preparation generated a set of tentative assumptions and identified a number of key factors to be subject to further analysis. The resulting draft terms of reference underwent peer review within IOE and were vetted both by IFAD's West and Central Africa Division and by the Government before the PPA mission left for Nouakchott. The mission had meetings with the executing partners of PDDO, various government authorities, the unions of AGPOs, the apex organization of the mutualistic oasis investment and lending institutions (MICO, *Mutuelle d'investissement et de crédit oasisien*) (UNMICO, *Union nationale des mutuelles d'investissement et de crédit oasisien*), Oases Participatory Management Associations (*Association de gestion participative des oasis*, AGPOs) and MICO at Wilaya d'Adrar, a broad range of beneficiaries and other key informants. The mission worked in close collaboration with the Ministry for Rural Development which had been the lead agency for PDDO.
5. **Context of the programme.** The central focal point of PDDO was date-palm growing, which provides the foundation of oasis economies and the centre of the social organization of oasis populations. The eight-year PDDO came into force in November 2004, following two previous Oasis Development Projects that ended in 2003. PDDO inherited a large body of knowledge and experience on which its own actions were based, aimed at attaining the overall goal of laying a solid foundation for oasis development by enabling the empowerment of oasis communities to participate effectively in the pursuit of the national objectives for poverty reduction and the fight against environmental degradation. This overall goal was pursued through three specific objectives: (i) develop local organization and management capabilities, promote the effective participation of oasis populations, notably women and young people, in the process of community and local development, and strengthen the institutional framework at oasis level; (ii) promote the rational and

sustainable exploitation of the productive potential of oases, particularly water resources; and (iii) develop a network of privately managed proximity financial services.

6. These objectives were pursued by carrying out a set of actions under five components: (i) Structuring of the oasis communities; (ii) Sustainable development of oasis production capacities, financed mainly through the Global Environment Facility (GEF); (iii) Development of proximity financial services; (iv) Development of basic infrastructure (parallel financing from the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (*Fonds arabe de développement économique et social*, FADES); and (v) Coordination, monitoring and evaluation. The total programme costs, estimated at US\$38.66 million, were financed by an IFAD loan for USD11.41 million and contributions from the Government (US\$6.79 million), beneficiaries (US\$1.36 million), GEF (US\$4.1 million) and FADES (US\$15 million). The lead agency was the Ministry for Rural Development. Loan administration and supervision was assured by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) until December 2010. As from January 2011, PDDO was supervised directly by IFAD. The completion date originally set for 31 December 2012 was extended to 30 April 2014, with the closing date becoming 30 October 2014. The extension was associated with a reallocation of the proceeds of the IFAD loan.
7. **Performances of the programme.** PPDO was highly relevant both in the context of the country and with respect to IFAD's priorities and the needs of target beneficiaries. Its objectives were fully aligned both with Government's policies on poverty reduction and rural development (*Cadre stratégique de lutte contre la pauvreté*, CSLP 2001-2015) and with the National Strategy for Rural Sector Development (*Stratégie de développement du secteur rural*). On IFAD's side, PDDO complied with the strategic options laid down in two Country Strategic Opportunities Programme (COSOPs 2000-2004 and 2007-2012). PDDO may be viewed as the first large-scale programme to contribute towards implementing the CSLP 2001-2015 in oasis environments. It introduced a participatory dynamics that involved the populations and their associations directly in the identification of needs and the planning and implementation of development actions. A relevant strategic focus of the design consisted in adopting oasis development and rehabilitation as entry points for promoting the organization and structuring of producers in the framework of local AGPOs. The decision to channel support through the AGPOs had every chance of being appropriate and hence adopted because the process generated concrete projects that had been identified and proposed by the AGPOs and the producers' cooperatives themselves. The AGPOs, their unions and a network of MICOs have already contributed towards strengthening the ability of oasis households to take effective action. PDDO's initiatives were backed by the development of micro-finance delivery of financial products adapted to the needs of the poor and by the establishment of a Village Investment Fund (FIC, *Fonds d'investissement communautaire*) that has provided concrete financial support for actions that emerge from the local participatory planning process. The promotion of MICOs was crucial as a source of highly appreciated proximity financial services to the rural populations. They are facilitating the learning of the skills needed to manage community-based financial institutions. In the oases, the MICOs are key actors in the financing of farming and income-generating activities. The resulting dynamics has facilitated access to finance by the most vulnerable categories targeted by PDDO, thereby creating an enabling environment for oasis development.
8. The desk study and the field visits confirmed the substantial achievements of PDDO. In terms of effectiveness, considerable efforts were deployed towards the strengthening, institutionalization and implementation of community-based participatory approaches, through the allocation of adequate human resources and the launching of a coherent set of accompanying actions aimed at facilitating the

mobilization, federation and organization of producers and village institutions around the issues linked to oasis development. PDDO helped fund 96 AGPOs who drew on FIC resources to carry out 513 micro-projects. There is broad consensus among the programme's partners and beneficiaries that the AGPOs are one of PDDO's most significant achievements, a view shared by this evaluation mission. Effectiveness of PDDO in qualitative terms was, however, somewhat weak, notably with regard to the strengthening of local ability to manage and maintain the village-level infrastructures and the lack of mechanisms linking the villages with local governments (*communes*). The efficiency of PDDO was weakened by the lengthy time that passed between approval by IFAD's Executive Board and effective start-up. Management costs were also higher than anticipated, representing 32 per cent of the total cost at closing.

9. In terms of **impact on rural poverty**, PDDO is rated moderately satisfactory. Direct support to the oasis populations through the delivery of financing from FIC and GEF, actions aimed at improving social structuring, training and other accompanying actions have resulted in substantial increases in the incomes of beneficiaries. Sources of income were diversified, notably through the development of date-palm production (66 per cent of total income), market gardening (27 per cent) and income-generating activities (7 per cent). The expansion of irrigation has resulted in increases both of yields and incomes and health has improved as a result of the building of safe water systems. The different actions of PDDO, with special reference to the many types of training, have resulted in visible improvements to human and social capital. Empowerment was promoted through the establishment of 96 AGPOs and 78 MICOs and educational levels have improved significantly among local populations. Social capital has undeniably been upgraded: PDDO has made a real contribution towards empowering local populations through participatory planning and the promotion of local control over infrastructure development (*maîtrise d'ouvrage locale*). That said, the impact of PDDO's activities in terms of natural resources management remained weak due to the essentially demonstrative nature of most of the initiatives undertaken. The resilience of local populations to climate change was, however, enhanced through GEF-financed actions. In terms of institutional development, PDDO has helped to consolidate and expand the enabling environment for self-help initiatives and the empowerment of oasis dwellers. The rapid development of the MICOs was significantly facilitated by their being village-based mutualistic institutions created by local members and managed by people elected by them. The enthusiasm of oasis dwellers with regard to this community-based financial service delivery model has attracted the attention of national institutions including those specialized in financial service delivery, and their validity was corroborated by the creation, in July 2014, of the apex organization called UNMICO.
10. In terms of **sustainability**, the achievements recorded since 2005 in the area covered by PDDO confirm the fundamental validity of the adopted development model. Unfortunately, although a significant *plateau* had been attained when the programme closed, the chances of long-term sustainability of its achievements are not encouraging. This is attributable to failure of PDDO to comply with the MTR recommendation (made in 2010) that a coherent exit and sustainability-enhancing strategy be developed and implemented with a view to transferring real responsibility to the AGPOs and their unions, while at the same time anchoring them firmly within the institutional framework of the forums at oasis level. Although the likelihood of sustainability is promising for many of the programme's achievements, performance assessments of the AGPOs, the regional unions and the MICOs, point to a need for continued support aimed at helping them become fully self-sustaining.
11. The strongest likelihood of sustainability is linked to Government's decision to take up the challenge of consolidating the efforts that had been made towards full

empowerment of the oasis populations. A second factor of sustainability is linked to the measures aimed at continuing those of the programme's activities that can implement Law 98-016 on the creation and institutionalization of the network of AGPOs. A third sustainability-enhancing factor is linked to the approval of the establishment of FADES, a new source of financing that will take over some of the IFAD-financed components. A fourth factor is linked to the Government's decision, taken at the end of 2013, to launch a reflexion on the institutional set-up needed to promote oasis development. At this stage, the framework being developed by the Government reportedly envisages the creation of the Agency for Integrated Oasis Development (ADIO, *Agence de Développement Intégré Oasien*) to be staffed by the management of PDDO.

12. Conversely, the foreseeable sustainability of the land development and irrigation systems is deemed weak for lack of proper maintenance. The water users associations do not have the financial resources they need to cover the costs of maintenance and repairs, including equipment replacement. The fees currently levied by the water committees do not cover their operating costs, not least the quality of maintenance, repair and replacement needed to prevent systems degradation. A heavy reliance on volunteers to run the systems is also not conducive to rigorous management, becoming another unfavourable factor in the institutionalization and sustainability of the infrastructures put in place with PDDO assistance.
13. In terms of **gender equality and women's empowerment**, PDDO carried out a broad range of targeted initiatives, including literacy training for women, promotion of women's membership in the cooperatives and associations, and support to women's income-generating activities, by facilitating their access to training and financial services through the MICOs and the FIC. A true entrepreneurial spirit has been fostered among the members of women's groups at oasis level and women are actively involved in the management of MICOs and AGPOs. Although the representation of women in decision-making bodies is improving, there is a need for further action to strengthen it.
14. In terms of **innovation and scaling up**, the AGPOs and MICOs had already been introduced under phase 2 of the Oasis Development Project. PDDO has made important contributions towards consolidating and scaling up these models. The main innovation is represented by the establishment of a farmer-based extension system through a "South-South" initiative involving exchange visits with households living in the oases of adjacent Morocco. These visits have generated improvements to the living conditions of the households living in the oases of Mauritania, thanks to the introduction of new vegetable-growing practices and new technologies for cooking, food handling and artisanal activities.
15. **The performance of IFAD** as the financier and supervisor of PDDO is highly appreciated by the other partners. PDDO has been directly supervised by IFAD since 2010 and the transfer of responsibility for loan management did not present any special problem. **The Government performance** was characterized by a satisfactory capacity to guide and delegate powers to the Project Coordination Unit (PCU). As the lead agency, the Ministry for Rural Development took early action by launching, before PDDO reached completion/closure, several initiatives aimed at establishing or guiding post-completion institutional follow-up. The envisaged collaboration with the Ministry for Environment for the implementation of the GEF-financed component did not generate significant results. As regards the **performance of the PCU**, the two main criticisms refer to the high management costs and weak monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Coordination and management costs, which had originally been estimated at 21.42 per cent of the IFAD loan, stood at 31.84 per cent when PDDO closed. The mission's desk study of progress and other reports confirms the weak performance of an M&E system that failed to

provide useful information for planning and drawing lessons for management follow-up.

16. In conclusion, **the overall performance of PDDO** is rated satisfactory. The programme's stronger points are related to its relevance and alignment with the priorities of the Government and IFAD and with the needs of the target group living in a heavily rural environment, subject to high levels of climate risk, erosion, natural resource degradation, water shortages, poverty and out-migration. Overall, PDDO has attained the specific objectives set at design and its achievements have laid the organizational foundation for generating the anticipated socio-economic transformation of life in the oases. Notwithstanding these globally positive achievements in terms of relevance, effectiveness and rural poverty impact, it is important not to forget that major challenges remain: the low likelihood of sustainability of infrastructures that may jeopardize the long-term durability of PDDO's achievements; a modest level of policy dialogue that has prevented the full integration of the AGPOs into institutional planning at local government level; the failure to foster synergies and complementarity with the Value Chains Development Programme for Poverty Reduction (*Programme de lutte contre la pauvreté rurale par l'appui aux filières*, ProLPRAF, also financed by IFAD); and the weak managerial ability of the water users associations.

### **Main recommendations**

17. **Policy dialogue.** PDDO took up the critically important challenge of obtaining the legal recognition needed by the AGPOs in order for them to act as the legal representatives of the oasis populations in the Government's process of decentralization to "commune" level. This evaluation mission agrees that it was not possible to address this challenge solely through the Oasis Consultation Forums (*Cadres oasiens de concertation*) envisaged at design. As a partner of Mauritania, IFAD is well placed to play an advocacy role in policy dialogue with the Government, the aim being to strengthen – both globally and with specific reference to their legal strategic positioning – the role of the AGPOs in the process of decentralization to the grass roots level in the oasis environment.
18. **Consolidation of the capacities of the AGPOs.** Continuing support is needed in order to strengthen the ability of the AGPOs and reinforce their structure so that they can manage their own development as demanding beneficiaries, rather than receiving beneficiaries.
19. **Knowledge of the water tables in the oases.** One of the most crucial post-closure issues of PDDO concerns the need to rationalize the management of scarce water resources in the oases. A better understanding of the underground water resources is urgently needed in order to guide their exploitation and management and also to monitor the impact of drawdowns of water, the pace of which is rising quickly as increasingly powerful pumping systems are being introduced. It is recommended that the financing of pumping systems by FADES be made subject to the prior conduct of an in-depth study of their foreseeable impact on the available underground resources.
20. **Sustainability of investments in the oases, maintenance and repairs.** In order to improve the likelihood of sustainability of the infrastructures put in place with PDDO assistance, it is necessary to introduce local cost-sharing mechanisms that are equitable and able to cover the foreseeable costs of proper maintenance, repairs and equipment replacement. Government should carry out an in-depth study of how the contributions of populations are being mobilized and the extent to which they are sufficient to guarantee the self-sustaining operation of the infrastructures in the longer term.
21. **Access to financial services.** The MICOs are already playing a crucial role as stimulators of agricultural and other economic activities in the oases where they are located. However, their needs in terms of capacity-building remain important

both for the individual MICOs and for the apex organization, UNMICO. There is considerable scope for improving the operations of the individual MICOs whose prospects for long-term viability will be heavily conditioned, in the short term, by immediate access to substantial technical and financial support. In the longer term, IFAD and the Government should take the opportunity offered by the new COSOP to envisage support for the drafting of a strategy aimed at promoting access by rural dwellers to financial services and to examine the feasibility of a rural finance project.