Country and Sector Background

Most of Mauritania’s territory, over one million km², is sand-covered and typically Saharan. Only in the south are conditions suitable for agriculture, stockraising and forestry. Over 85 percent of the country’s 2.3 million inhabitants (1995) live in the area south of the Nouakchott-Tidjikja line, on less than one third of the nation’s land. Crop farming is practiced in the Senegal Valley and in the so-called ‘agro-sylvo-pastoral’ area. Yields from grain cultivation have decreased from 1965-69 to 1988-92, with the exception of paddy yields, which have increased, thanks to irrigation in the Valley.

The livestock subsector accounts for 74 percent of agricultural sector output and 17 percent of GNP. It is one of three key subsectors of the Mauritanian economy, the others being fisheries and mining. Biodiversity in terms of national parks, reserves and protected sites, is under increasing pressure; underground water, particularly in the cases, is over-exploited; the forest area is experiencing continuous degradation since fuelwood consumption is estimated to be much higher than the sustainable rate of exploitation; encroachment of the sand dunes is moving south and towards the coastal area; and coastal fishing, the main source of foreign exchange, is showing a decline in catch as a result of overfishing. Socioeconomic developments have also taken their toll, with a growing proportion of herds belonging to urban owners, who now compete with traditional herders all year round. Faced with this grave menace to the country’s natural resources, the Government, with donor assistance, has taken serious steps to address the ongoing problem of degradation.

Project Objectives

The project would be the first five-year segment of a long-term (15-20 years) natural resource management program. The long-term
objectives of the project would be to halt the environmental degradation of the rainfed agro-pastoral part of the country while increasing the income and improving the quality of life of the area’s rural population. In the medium term, the project would: (a) provide rural communities the financial means to manage their resources in a way which would ensure the sustainable growth of their production through the intensification of agricultural, forestry and livestock activities; (b) promote institutional building by promoting communities organization, improving the legal framework and enhancing Government capacity, aiming at beneficiaries’ empowerment and (c) improve technical knowledge and skills of both Government services and project beneficiaries.

Project Description

The project would have three components to be implemented in the country’s rainfed area; it would finance: (a) village investments (US$16 million) including natural resource rehabilitation (planting, erosion control, dune fixation), productive investments (water supply, rural buildings, small equipment), and micro-enterprises matching grants (fattening, grain storage, retail stores); (b) effective institution support (US$4.0 million) for agricultural services at the regional level and below; and (c) skill development (US$1.0 million) to be carried out either by Government entities (in the cases of research, technical support, maps), NGOs (in the cases of training, public awareness, village support), or other donors (in the cases of complementary programs). Among the technologies to be used under component (a) above, most (land and water conservation) have been tested under pilot operations carried out by previous projects in Mauritania and elsewhere.

Project Financing

The project is estimated to cost US$23.5 million of which IDA would finance US$16.4 million; the Government and the beneficiaries’ contribution would total US$7.1 million. Parallel financing would be provided by the European Union in Regions (Brakna, Tagant and Trarza) where the project would not intervene, and 56 percent of the IDA credit amount would be allocated to village-level investments.

Project Implementation

Community-based natural resource management includes six major activities which would be implemented as follows: (a) resource management planning would be carried out according to the experience of earlier projects, insuring the full involvement of all stakeholders, especially the women and the poor; community management plans would be reviewed at municipal and regional levels, and would become the building blocks of further communal and regional development action plans; (b) domestic energy would be addressed by having the Review of Policies in Traditional Energy Sector (RPTES) setting up a fuelwood participative production and marketing strategy to be implemented by the project’s as a pilot program; (c) as far as land tenure is concerned, the Government would support the implementation of the ‘test approach’ aiming at adjusting and mainstreaming existing unformal access practices on a pilot basis; (d) skill development - would aim at developing the skills of administrative and technical staff, as well as communities for which
topics, such as functional literacy and accounting, would be covered in coordination with the Agricultural Services Project; and (e) project’s impact monitoring - would consist in a system covering altogether project’s long terms and development objectives, using simultaneously quantitative indicators to be measured by technical staff, and qualitative indicators to be estimated through beneficiaries’assessments.

Project Sustainability

Sustainability can be assured through measures carried out by the various levels of management. At the village level, investments to be financed under the project would be implemented only after beneficiaries are effectively organized, the rules of access to resources to be financed have been accepted, and their operation and maintenance costs are being raised and properly managed. At the communal level, village resource management plans would be consolidated into ‘action plans of communal development’ for which preparation has been requested by the recent Congress of Mauritanian Mayors. At the Central and regional levels, the project’s setup would be part of the permanent rural development and environmental administrative services. At the sub-regional level, Mauritania would be part of the Sahelian/West African natural resource management network currently developed to identify obstacles and find solutions through a permanent sharing of experience between neighboring countries.

Poverty Category

Program of Targetted Interventions. The project would benefit the poorest segments of the rural community, especially in the rainfed area, where the population of project beneficiaries has a significantly larger proportion of poor people than the population as a whole (i.e., the rural income is lower in the country’s rainfed area than in the Valley, and the income of agro-pastoralists is lower than that of the rest of the population including civil servants, traders, and others.)

Environmental Aspects

The proposed project carries minor environmental risks for agricultural land, while it aims at a major environmental rehabilitation of rangeland and forestry areas. It is therefore rated ‘B’ in terms of environmental impact. A gender-sensitive social assessment and an environmental assessment have been carried out as part of project’s preparation and an appropriate mitigation plan including close beneficiaries’ involvement, coordination with other stakeholders, training and monitoring, has been agreed upon.

Program Objective Categories

Although the project would have an impact on several issues that are among IDA’s priorities in rural areas, the primary program objective category of the project is sustainable growth of the GDP, which the project would address by providing rural communities with organization, skills development, relevant policies and access to financial resources. It would also ensure that Government services are effective by supporting the decentralized technical services and it
would also create a consultation interface between the Government, on the one hand, and the rural communities and elected commune leaders, on the other. The secondary program objective is environmental improvement of the rainfed agro-pastoral area of the country. This would be achieved through the proper of agricultural land, forest and grazing areas and the coordination of project’s activities with other ongoing and future operations dealing with research, extension, household energy, and biodiversity.

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Note: This is information on an evolving project. Certain components may not necessarily be included in the final project.

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