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**2000 General Population and Housing Census in Mauritania: specific
characteristics of the nomadic environment***

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A. Overall context

1. Formerly the country most closely identified with nomads and the nomadic way of life, Mauritania has, since its independence in 1960, seen its nomadic population become sedentary at a spectacular rate. Nomads accounted for 75 per cent of the total population in 1965, but by 1988 that proportion had decreased to 12 per cent and by 2000 was estimated at a little under 6 per cent. The rapid, unprecedented rate at which the nomadic population became sedentary can be explained by several factors, most notably the drought of the 1970s and 1980s and the improvement in living conditions, particularly among the sedentary population, which encouraged nomads to settle around the main urban centres.

2. Mauritania has relatively wide experience in data collection, having conducted three general population censuses and more than 10 household surveys.

3. Nevertheless, for a developing country like Mauritania, conducting a census of a population of 2.5 million inhabitants scattered over a vast territory of more than 1 million square kilometres in area is still a laborious and very costly operation. The difficulties are compounded when it comes to a nomadic population, estimated at less than 150,000 inhabitants, that is in constant movement over an immense territory and sometimes beyond the country's administrative borders.

4. It is in this context that the third general population and housing census was conducted in November 2000 for the sedentary population and in April 2001 for the nomadic population. This note briefly outlines the main methodological aspects of the census of the nomadic population and the main difficulties encountered.

B. Methodology

1. Preparatory phase

5. A number of activities prior to enumeration were conducted to ensure that enumeration was exhaustive and that there was no double counting. These included census cartography, a pilot census and a public awareness campaign.

a. Cartography

6. The aim with respect to the nomadic population was to supply the list and the location by geographical coordinates of the water points frequented by nomads throughout the national territory. This operation took six months of fieldwork (March to August 2000) and involved 11 mobile teams. By the end of this period, some 3,000 water points had been located.

b. Pilot census

7. The pilot census of the nomadic population was conducted in May 1999. Its purpose was to test the entire methodological approach to be used for the census of the nomadic population and to evaluate the workload of census workers. After the results of the pilot census were processed, important methodological changes were made to the overall methodology, including:

- Preparation of a specific questionnaire for the nomadic population;
- Confirmation that nomads would be in the national territory during the period from February to May; and
- Validation of the choice of the water points method.

c. Public awareness campaign

8. The public awareness campaign for the nomadic population relied purely on rural radio stations and the role of local authorities, notables and elected officials. Other means of raising public awareness, such as television, newspapers and public meetings, were ruled out as being largely ineffective in a nomadic environment.

In keeping with their tradition of hospitality, the nomads cooperated fully with the census teams, not only by providing the requested information but also very often by helping the teams whenever the need arose.

2. Data collection

a. Data-collection tools

9. Data-collection tools include the questionnaire, the various instruction manuals and technical data sheets. The questionnaire covered the essential variables on nuptiality, fertility, mortality and other socio-economic characteristics of the population. It also had a special section on nomadic living conditions which enquired about housing, intentions of becoming sedentary, household possessions and the type of livestock raised.

b. Period and duration of data collection

10. Since nomads are extremely mobile, the choice of a data-collection period is absolutely decisive for the success of the census. Enumeration of the nomadic population took place from 10 March to 20 April 2001, whereas that of the sedentary population took place from 1 to 15 November 2000. The period was chosen following consultations with local authorities and based on the experience of earlier data-collection operations. The processing of the pilot census confirmed this choice.

11. The period chosen is one in which the nomadic population is relatively stable around water points and, more importantly, one in which nearly all nomads are still in the national territory before beginning the transhumance (seasonal migration) to bordering countries such as Mali and Senegal.

12. The transhumance varies from one region to another and according to the type of livestock raised. Generally speaking, it begins around June and lasts until October of each year.

c. Organization of data collection

13. The data-collection method most suited to conditions in Mauritania is the so-called water points method, the principle of which is to identify the presence of nomadic camps around water points and then take a census of the nomads, camp by camp and household by household, for each separate water point. For verification purposes and to avoid double counting, a census receipt is issued to each household after it has been enumerated.

14. With the results obtained from census cartography, the country was divided into eight nomadic census zones (each comprising one or more regions), which were in turn subdivided into one or more sectors. Each zone was supervised by an official from the central census office appointed for this purpose, and each sector was assigned to a team consisting of three census workers, a guide, a driver and a team leader.

15. Questionnaires were filled out in situ by census workers by directly interviewing the head of household or another adult member of the household.

16. The team leader was responsible for systematically checking on a daily basis every questionnaire filled out in situ.

17. Given the huge distances to be covered, teams were provided with all the necessary means

(four-wheel drive vehicles, fuel, water, etc.). No problems were experienced in this regard. Teams operating in sectors classified as “difficult” (12 of the 26 sectors) were also each given a GPS (Global Positioning System) and a multifrequency radio antenna linked to the central base set up on central census office premises in Nouakchott. In all, 28 mobile teams were set up—26 operational in the field and two in reserve.

C. Main difficulties

18. Several problems emerged in the course of the census. The main ones are described below.

1. *Difficulties of access*

19. Access is difficult to some water points and camps in remote desert areas. In these areas, teams went out with vehicles equipped with radio antennas, GPS and, above all, plenty of water. Teams reported their position regularly to the central census office and the local authorities.

2. *Nomads outside the borders*

20. Some nomadic tribes, albeit few in number, were reported to be outside the country.

3. *Absence of a post-enumeration survey (PES)*

21. There was no post-enumeration survey for the nomadic population. Two measures were taken to address this problem:

22. *Administrative safeguards.* Meetings with minutes signed by the local authorities attesting that, after analysing the results presented by the teams, the authorities certify that, based on their knowledge of the area, the results presented by the teams are exhaustive and no nomadic camp or water point has been omitted. It should be mentioned here that the authorities generally know their area well.

23. *Technical safeguards:* Inspection missions carried out in situ throughout the data-collection period by officials of the central census office, enabling the quality of the data collected in situ to be checked. An expert from the United Nations Population Fund took part in some of these missions.

D. Discussion

24. In concluding this brief outline, I wish to raise the following points for discussion:

25. Given the specific characteristics of the nomadic environment, particularly population mobility and the high costs of data collection, is it possible to conduct a survey of coverage for the nomadic population? If so, how? If not, should methods more suited to the nomadic environment perhaps be developed to evaluate errors of coverage and data quality?

26. Even if censuses concern only residents within the national territory, should we involve national nomads who are in the territory of bordering countries at the time of enumeration, given that the concept of residence does not mean very much in a nomadic environment and the nomadic way of life scarcely recognizes borders between states?

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