



Lessons learned from socio-economic interventions in Mauritania

By Salamata Ouédraogo Cheikhou on behalf of Anti-Slavery International,
SOS-Esclaves et Minority Rights Group International

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Project participants from Atar with National Coordinator of SOS-Esclaves, Salimata Lam (second left)

The potential of socio-economic interventions in Mauritania

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study assesses the impact of three income-generating activities (IGA) projects implemented in Mauritania between 2017 and 2019 by partners Anti-Slavery International, SOS-Esclaves and Minority Rights Group International (MRG).

Convinced of the need to incorporate a socio-economic approach as part of the assistance given to survivors of slavery, Anti-Slavery, SOS-Esclaves and MRG strongly encourage those stakeholders with the necessary capacities and mandate (such as the governmental agency 'Tadamoun' or other national or international humanitarian/development organizations) to invest more in socio-economic initiatives to support the most vulnerable victims of slavery.

These recommendations are intended to (1) highlight the realities and obstacles facing those affected by slavery (psychological, legal and social factors) and which must be taken into account when implementing socio-economic initiatives; (2) enable stakeholders (local government, national and international organizations, research centres, civil society and others) to benefit from the lessons we have learned about best practices in conducting such interventions; and (3) facilitate greater harmony between the knowledge, approaches and tools of the stakeholders involved to ensure synergies between their interventions.

Section 1.

Context for interventions by Anti-Slavery International and SOS-Esclaves

Slavery in Mauritania

The Mauritanian population (3.5 million) is made up of diverse ethnic groups. The ‘Beidanes’ (or ‘White Moors’) have a tradition of slavery dating back several centuries. During razzias, people belonging to black ethnic groups were enslaved to form a ‘slave’ class (also known as ‘Black Moors’). Today, although most of them have been able to separate from their ‘masters’ and now live independently (known as ‘Haratines’), thousands¹ of slave descendants continue to live under the direct control of their masters.

It is extremely difficult to flee slavery. Having been treated as someone else’s property since childhood, people in slavery receive no education or financial resources and usually lack the skills (such as the ability to count money) that would allow them to live outside of slavery. It is nearly impossible for them to get civil status documentation. This makes it very difficult for those who have fled slavery to find work outside conditions of exploitation, which is why it is so important to give them access to economic activities that can help them to live independently of their former masters, without exposing them to the risk of exploitation. Even people who left their masters generations ago (‘Haratines’) continue to carry the social status of slaves and therefore face constant discrimination.

Women are particularly vulnerable. They are often victims of sexual abuse at the hands of their masters, and any children they have are also considered to belong to their masters. In many cases they are confined to the home (for the purposes of sexual and reproductive control) and their movements and social interactions are restricted, thus significantly curtailing any chance they might have of escape. Those who do manage to leave face tougher challenges than their male counterparts. Having children who depend on them further complicates any potential escape attempt. Under Mauritanian law, unmarried women have few rights, and mothers have greater constraints and economic needs. They are also vulnerable to Sharia law, which forbids the extramarital relations of which their children are proof.

¹ This is an estimate as there are no reliable national statistics to establish the number of people still living in slavery in Mauritania.

Interventions by Anti-Slavery International: Importance of the socio-economic dimension

In partnership with the Mauritanian organization SOS-Esclaves since 1995, Anti-Slavery International has pioneered efforts to support the fight against slavery and Mauritania. Since 2005, many projects have been implemented to develop research, awareness-raising campaigns and advocacy at national and international levels, as well as to provide direct assistance to those emerging from slavery. In 2010, SOS-Esclaves and Anti-Slavery formed a collaborative partnership with MRG to reinforce the legal aid available to victims of slavery.

Over the years, socio-economic assistance has proven to be a crucial element in advancing victims of slavery towards autonomy: with no resources or job opportunities, many victims initially refuse to leave their masters or are at risk of finding themselves in another exploitative relationship after they flee. They are often discouraged by the sight of other slaves who have fled and are living in total deprivation on the margins of society, at risk of retribution at the hands of their masters. Beyond the lack of revenue, the extreme vulnerability of survivors of slavery (illiteracy, psychological trauma, health problems, social stigmatisation, no recognised civil status, dependents whose needs they must meet, targeted by exploitation or acts of revenge by their former masters, etc.) requires a **holistic approach that recognises not only their economic but also their social needs**. SOS-Esclaves previously offered financial support to victims, but that ran the risk of creating a dependency that would keep them in a passive state of disempowerment and vulnerability. In contrast, endowing survivors with the skills and resources they need to meet their own needs brings them dignity and allows them to take control of their future, two things they had not previously experienced. In order to meet the complex needs of survivors of slavery and optimise the impact of the assistance provided, Anti-Slavery and SOS-Esclaves put in place several socio-economic projects. To reflect their intersectional vulnerability, women were prioritised when selecting beneficiaries, in particular women emerging from slavery, vulnerable Haratine women (women in charge of a household with dependent children, no revenue and no training), and girls struggling at school.



Project participant in Atar

- **‘DRL’² project: Professional training and micro-financing** - *Nouakchott, 2016-2019*
198 female slave descendants received daily professional training in their choice of one of four areas (hairdressing, sewing, cooking or veil-dyeing), as well as literacy classes for a period of six months. They also benefited from grants (a total of US\$ 134/ MRU 4,859 each), which enabled to start up income-generating activities (IGAs).
- **‘DRL’ project: Micro-financing and mentoring** - *Atar, Bassiknou and Nema regions, 2016-2019*
180 female slave descendants, including around 145 direct survivors, living in rural regions, facing highly precarious economic and social circumstances, and who had never had the opportunity to work for themselves, received financial aid in the form of grants (non-reimbursable) and benefited from mentoring (economic assistance, social rehabilitation and other aspects) at ‘Focal Points’ with supervisors and local members of SOS-Esclaves.
- **‘Bouamatou’ project: Micro-financing** - *Aleg, Nema and Rosso regions, 2017*
15 direct survivors of slavery from three rural villages received grants (non-reimbursable) to set up commercial stalls in front of their houses (selling salt, sweets, single cigarettes and other items). This was also the first time these women had had the chance to engage in activities that gave them financial autonomy and take on a role as contributors to their social environment, in which they had traditionally been seen as objects, subject to the will of their masters.



Project participants in Atar

² DRL is the project funder; the ‘Bureau of Democracy, Rights and Labor’ of the United States Government State Department.

Section 2.

Results of study of socio-economic interventions

Building on the experience of these programmes and convinced of the need to incorporate socio-economic assistance as a way to facilitate the reintegration and emancipation of survivors of slavery, we undertook a study to assess the impact of these initiatives. The study is qualitative, based on interviews with 180 beneficiaries and 20 women who were non-beneficiaries living in the same areas (in order to obtain comparative observations).

Overall, the study reveals that micro-financing projects serve to promote the women's role as 'contributor' both to their household and their community.

Raising the socio-economic status of women

Close to 90% of the women involved told us that the initiatives had enabled them to play a more important economic role in their household by contributing to daily domestic expenses such as food, healthcare, clothing and schooling. A comparison with the situations of the non-beneficiary respondents confirms that the IGAs give women a chance to develop greater autonomy in terms of decision-making in the home. Since the implementation of these activities, none of the families has gone without a meal or been unable to cope with healthcare or schooling expenses. This increase in their economic power has also enabled them to be more autonomous vis-à-vis family members on whom they previously depended.

Close to 60% of participants report feeling endowed with an entrepreneurial mindset. This percentage is all the more significant when one considers their initial vulnerability. The grants and loans linked to the IGAs – the primary purpose of which was to allow these women to meet their most essential needs – did not enable all participants to reinvest this revenue in the development of their entrepreneurial activities. The IGAs in Nouakchott focusing on urban women with a relatively high level of autonomy enabled a greater proportion of them to conduct related activities (e.g. sale of refined crops, incense and other items) than in rural areas. Nonetheless, the testimonies provided by participants suggest that, independent of their varying capacities to further develop their business, the IGAs provide stimulation in their lives and encourage them to constantly strive to improve their performance. In this way, these socio-economic interventions give both descendants and direct survivors the chance to move on from their past links to slavery and gain self-confidence.

Impact on households

For 80% of the women involved, increasing their self-confidence through the IGAs resulted in greater participation in family decision-making.

In particular, respondents told us they felt valued when it came to defending important causes such as their children's education: **45% of them took action by ensuring at least one child went to school.** It is noteworthy that this impact could be reinforced by making the enrolment of at least one child in school a precondition of participation in IGAs. Furthermore, **50% of the women noticed that contributing more to the management of household affairs made them more valued in the eyes of their husbands.**

Impact on communities

80% of respondents say they have gained self-confidence as a result of feeling more useful to their communities.

Because they involve frequent dialogue within the community, the IGAs – as well as strengthening the status of the women involved – are a lever for the development of social solidarity through initiatives such as further support or loans to the most deprived families so they can feed themselves. Furthermore, the increased self-esteem of women engaged in IGAs at a community level carries a high potential of inspiring others still stuck in slavery to identify with these participants and find the courage to free themselves.

In brief, micro-financing projects provide appropriate responses to the local and endogenous realities facing households and communities and also to the twofold discrimination from which women slave descendants suffer. Given their impact, such socio-economic initiatives can be seen to be in line with national policies and strategies when it comes to promoting gender equality and greater autonomy for women, as well as efforts to combat the vestiges of slavery.

Section 3.

Obstacles and lessons learned

The multilevel success of the socio-economic interventions is encouraging and suggests that investing more in micro-financing activities can magnify the impact of the assistance given to Haratine/slave descendant communities. Many obstacles must nonetheless be anticipated to ensure an effective and sustained impact of the IGA initiative. These are presented below. Recommendations intended to guide others considering implementing such activities are also provided to help them face these obstacles.

Targeting and accessing participants

Even after escaping, victims of slavery generally remain confined to the areas in which they have always lived, in many cases still under the economic and political domination of their former masters. They must therefore endure encounters – at best occasional and at worst repetitive – with their former masters or their family members, which can intimidate victims and discourage any initiative towards emancipation.

- ⋮ This reality means that organizations involved must cooperate with as many local stakeholders as possible and increase the visibility of emancipated survivors so they can serve as an example and inspire other victims in their quest for autonomy.

Choosing IGAs

Due to their social stigmatisation, slavery survivors find it extremely difficult to enter the job market. Providing them with professional training is crucial if they are to find employment and avoid falling back into exploitative circumstances.

Choosing training courses and IGAs to implement is a complex task given the inherent vulnerability of victims of slavery. In particular, their total lack of initial training, experience managing a business, or the capacity to handle financial transactions, as well as their past trauma and suffering, limit their self-confidence and scope for action. Taking these realities into account, it makes more sense to invite participants to take up IGAs in areas that are familiar to them, such as breeding or the sale of couscous or vegetables, with which they have been traditionally associated.

Access to land:

Most plots of agricultural land are owned by slave masters, and so are practically inaccessible for emancipated victims of slavery, which means that vegetable-growing is an activity beyond their reach.

Selling couscous:

Most women consider the sale of couscous to be a very fastidious task – its preparation requires much physical effort, and cooking in a wood oven generates a lot of smoke that is harmful to their health and the environment. Furthermore, survivors see the sale of couscous as a stigmatising activity for female slaves and so refuse to be associated with it.

Animal-rearing:

Women consider animal-rearing to be a difficult activity, and the reserve of men. Maintaining the livestock requires long trips to distant locations with the risk of possible attacks. As well as the fact that animal-rearing only generates profits in the medium to long term, it also involves veterinary fees and the risk of considerable financial losses. Since they are in positions of financial desperation, participants are therefore reluctant to invest in animal-rearing.

Selling vegetables:

Weighing, counting and planning the conservation of perishable goods such as vegetables are tasks that can be intimidating or even impossible for victims of slavery. The logistical difficulties and the risk of losses are too significant for the sale of vegetables to be a strategic choice.

As a result, all participants opted to set up shops, involving general trade, selling a wide range of food, household or consumer goods.

Shop IGAs:

These shops belong to solidarity action groups comprising 10 women and are managed in rotas by teams of 2 to 3 women for periods of 2 months. These groups benefit from the support of staff at SOS-Esclaves.

Participants justified their choice on the basis that managing a shop would be “easier” and allow them to meet the financial needs of their households more effectively. The flexibility they enjoy in terms of product diversification (subject to availability and market demand) allows them to minimise the risk of losses inherent in the exclusive sale of certain products, particularly in the case of perishables such as vegetables. This way, the stores guarantee daily cash flow which participants can use to meet their everyday needs (meals, unforeseeable expenses) without too much stress. Furthermore, because the shops are set up informally close to their homes, the women are able to work while at the same time keeping an eye on their children and household. The ease with which they can manage their shops and the ability to generate immediate profits also mean that women who are eager to expand their business can develop individual activities linked to their shops – and even seek credit from SOS-Esclaves if necessary.

These criteria – **ease of management** (given the limited capacities of participants), the **nature of the tasks** involved (it is important not to recreate the domesticity or servile past of participants) and **short-term profitability** (survivors face urgent daily financial needs) – must be prioritised when choosing IGAs. And because they understand their own needs better than anyone else, it is essential to **give participants the freedom to choose their own IGAs.**

Duration of professional training

The IGAs run as part of the DRL project offered participants the chance to complete six-month training courses designed to develop their skills in the vocation of their choice (hairdressing, sewing, cooking or dyeing) and, when these courses ended, to benefit from financing with a view to setting up an IGA in their chosen profession. **80% of participants would have liked their training courses to be longer and only 20% of them felt equipped with the skills they needed to embark on a specific profession** at the end of their training.

Hairdressing and sewing:

Participants felt these training courses should last at least 12 months in order to equip them with the skills needed for these professions, as they did not have time to tackle tailoring (sewing) or braids, extensions or haircare (hairdressing).

Dyeing:

Although they did not have the time to acquire additional skills such as how to cut veils or perform other types of dyeing, the women felt that 6 months had been enough to take on this profession. They also pointed out that the associated IGAs had quickly allowed them to meet some of their needs (medicine and clothing for their children).

Cooking:

The cookery training courses were particularly satisfactory, with one participant finding work in a restaurant and others learning the techniques needed to prepare juices and thereby increase their homefront sales, particularly during celebratory ceremonies. Two beneficiaries told us they had really benefited from the training, in particular from the baking techniques they had learned. Nonetheless, our respondents recommend extending this training course, suggesting that a duration of one year would allow them to expand their knowledge to include other aspects of catering.

... The recommendation is to ensure that the duration of training courses is sufficient – at least 12 months – and that they are adapted to reflect the level of education and skills of targeted participants. Choosing the instructor and the quality of his or her teaching approach are key considerations in ensuring effective training.



A classroom in the Nouakchott training centre

Training and follow-up of solidarity groups: key role played by Focal Points

The involvement of many members (as part of our IGAs, each group comprised 10 women) generally facilitated better follow-up and monitoring of activities, with **projects managed in groups enjoying better success than those managed individually**. Furthermore, the training for solidarity groups gave rise to many different types of spontaneous mutual assistance between the women involved, for example making it easier for the most deprived among them to obtain loans to purchase meals or essential medicines until such time as they had the financial resources to repay them.

However, such group cohesion is difficult to establish and maintain. Because their extreme marginalisation has been normalised for centuries (in Mauritanian society but also within their own communities and families), survivors and descendants of slavery have a strong tendency to remain isolated. While consolidation was seen in some groups, others – in particular within the DRL project (3 in Atar, 3 in Néma and 3 in Bassiknou) – weakened over time. It would appear that the reason for this was insufficient, or even non-existent, monitoring of the activities on the ground.

It is recommended that **at least one supervisor (full-time) should be made available to ensure optimum support for groups in each locality. To make sure that participants do not withdraw from the scheme and can benefit fully from the social and educational advantages of group meetings, they must receive individual support at a Focal Point or from SOS-Esclaves members so they can be adequately reassured and encouraged.**

It is essential to ensure **excellent communication from the outset** within groups so that the rules of the activity are properly understood and regular participation is encouraged at all group meetings. Without clear communication and a cohesive mindset, some beneficiaries may end their participation in meetings or even withdraw from their group.

It is also therefore necessary for mentors to monitor activities on the ground throughout the duration of the initiative to ensure the continuity of sound IGA management, in particular for the most vulnerable participants.

Importance of financial education and choosing the right micro-financing

The study revealed that most participants in the socio-economic activities were unable to document their finances – expenses, income, profits, etc. – over the course of the initiative (which explains why this was a qualitative study only).

It is imperative to offer financial education (as well as daily monitoring) so participants can understand and document their finances. Without this, they will be unable to keep track of their losses and gains, and their sense of control and autonomy will not increase. Furthermore, strengthening their understanding of finances will give them greater access to a wider range of financial aids, microcredit in particular.

Good governance and minimising security risks

To ensure good governance and sound financial management within the group, Focal Points should make sure that the texts governing how the IGAs operate (in particular stipulating that the funds generated must be deposited in a financial institution and that withdrawals must be jointly managed by a chairperson and treasurer) are systematically respected. As well as the risk of financial losses that poor governance can entail, participants living in conditions of widespread insecurity are at risk of attack from thieves if they are suspected of holding significant sums of money.

Project mentors and supervisors must ensure that the methods in place to secure money are effective (e.g. joint signatories to open an account, appointing treasurers and auditors to manage funds and profits generated) and carry out regular assessments to confirm that the IGA operating rules are being complied with.



Project participants in Atar

Adapting training programmes

It was decided to tailor the professional training courses for slave descendants living in Nouakchott as they generally have higher levels of literacy and self-confidence than the direct survivors of slavery living in rural areas, who, with more limited skills and living in highly precarious circumstances, would have found it very difficult to complete the training, thus having negative repercussions for their psychological and social well-being.

Optimising the impact of socio-economic projects

Amounts allocated:

As already pointed out, the amounts allocated as part of the IGA initiatives³ were limited and prioritised the aim of enabling women to meet their most essential needs. Only a few participants – mainly urban with higher levels of autonomy – managed to invest/develop their IGAs in order to optimise their income.

- The amounts allocated must reflect the basic socio-economic level of participants and the specific objective of the IGA scheme (cover basic needs or encourage development).

Modalities:

As well as reinforcing financial education through training and daily monitoring, it is recommended that the entrepreneurial potential of participants should be stimulated by giving them the chance to access more grants. In particular, this would encourage them to better keep track of their expenses and profits. There are several possible approaches:

1. **Microcredit:** for the participants best equipped to manage their finances, we suggest documenting the development of their assets and actions to encourage them to expand their businesses – an approach that is widely applied in all three areas.
2. **Step-by-step grants:** offering microcredit to the least confident participants could actually be harmful (generating the stress of managing loans), and so it is recommended that they be given access to grants in a gradual manner – rather than giving them the entire sum all at once – to encourage them to better manage their finances and sustain their motivation to respect a dynamic of responsibility towards the group.

- In line with the ‘Do no harm’ approach, before offering any grant, loan or training to victims of slavery, it is essential to ensure that this aid will not risk exacerbating their initial vulnerability (stress of managing debt, decline in self-confidence due to an inability to complete the training, etc.). However, where there is no risk of a negative impact, the emancipatory effect of micro-financing should be optimised by encouraging the women to pursue their learning.

³The amounts allocated were US\$ 1,400/MRU 52,000 per woman and per solidarity group. They were used to cover the cost of activities, equipment and facilities.

Optimising the impact at a community level

In response to the intersectional discrimination against female slave descendants, it is imperative that we work to change how they are perceived in the communities in which they live, and in particular perceptions among men. Local patriarchal cultural norms position female victims of slavery at the bottom of the social ladder.

- To encourage systemic and lasting change that favours the emancipation of these women, it is necessary to run campaigns – through local mentors – to raise awareness about the twofold stigmatisation they face.
- At the same time as these awareness-raising efforts, we encourage mentors, Focal Points and local supervisors to establish reporting mechanisms to enable women to flag up any negative impact of their involvement in the activity (e.g. tensions or jealousy in the home or community due to their increased level of responsibility). Training is also recommended for the stakeholders so they can provide psychological and social support or intervene to resolve any conflicts that might arise.

Sustainability: a combined approach

The lasting impact of socio-economic initiatives depends on the capacity of participants in the long term to take charge of their own future without additional support. As mentioned above, in order for participants to be able to do without the assistance of mentors or coordinators, it is imperative for these stakeholders to provide participants with a solid grounding in financial education, professional skills and literacy. We also recommend adopting a combined approach that can reinforce both the institutional and communitarian roots of such initiatives.

At the community level, we recommend establishing a robust relationship between (1) the participants, (2) the organizational team – supervisor and mentor, and (3) the Focal Points within the community, and holding monthly meetings at which the attendance of each stakeholder is mandatory.

At the institutional level, a certain number of structures (micro-financing institutes established locally) and local figures (volunteers or activists in the fight to eradicate slavery; State authorities, the Ministry for Women in particular; or religious and traditional groups) must be involved in the implementation of IGAs in order to ensure long-term support.

Section 4.

Recommendations for governmental and humanitarian/development stakeholders to capitalise on socio-economic interventions

To ensure socio-economic initiatives have an impact on the lives of participants and on the development of their communities, and to ensure alignment between the IGAs and national policies and strategies on promoting gender equality and greater economic autonomy for women, Anti-Slavery International emphasises the importance of capitalising on such initiatives. With the help of institutional backers (US DRL and UK DFID), ASI managed a sixfold increase in the scope of its socio-economic interventions: whereas in 2007 only around 60 women received financial aid (US\$ 140/MRU 5,203), this figure rose to 378 in 2018. It should be noted that beneficiaries initially managed their grants individually, but since 2014 have done so in groups.

However, these initiatives have only made it possible to respond to a small fraction of local needs – the capacities of SOS-Esclaves and its partners are limited to the areas covered by State institutions.

Anyone affected by slavery and with the necessary capacities and mandates are strongly encouraged to invest in micro-financing initiatives. **The presence of micro-financing institutes in Mauritania (e.g. ‘Djiké’; EPC – ‘Epargne Pour le Changement’; AVEC – ‘Associations Villageoises d’Epargne et de Crédit’) is particularly favourable for the local expansion of socio-economic projects** as it facilitates access to financing in all areas where victims of slavery can be found. Beyond their clear effectiveness, these community-level microcredit organizations would contribute to the long-term survival of IGAs.

Other recommendations on data management and knowledge alignment

Research on the wounds of slavery is increasingly abundant, although significant disparities remain. The roots of stakeholders in the communities in which they intervene – for whom digital tools are of little use – partly explains the absence of any website listing these stakeholders.

The creation of a website centralising information about the fight against slavery and those involved (mandates, actions and achievements) would generate greater synergies between local and international contributors. Establishing a database listing all of the research and data, both qualitative and quantitative, on the issue of slavery and its legacy would also facilitate future analyses/assessments.

At governmental level, we encourage the creation of a national digital file to monitor all registered survivors of slavery; this could be done by the governmental body Tadamoun. Subject to the informed (and retractable) consent of victims, such a file would make it possible to record their profiles and document their specific needs as part of an online system. Digitalisation of this data would minimise the duplication of information and support on-the-ground operations in the fight against slavery, thereby facilitating and optimising the assistance given to victims.

Because participants in socio-economic activities are often illiterate and struggle to document their finances (which is why this study was qualitative and recommends more financial training for the women involved), more quantitative research on the economic impact of IGAs would be useful.



Project participant in Atar

Anti-Slavery International, founded in 1839, is committed to eliminating all forms of slavery throughout the world. Slavery, servitude and forced labour are violations of individual freedoms, which deny millions of people their basic dignity and fundamental human rights. Anti-Slavery International works to end these abuses by exposing current cases of slavery, campaigning for its eradication, supporting the initiatives of local organisations to release people, and pressing for more effective implementation of international laws against slavery.

For further information see: www.antislavery.org

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