



UN Volunteer Miho Mitobe helps increase the visibility of the World Food Programme's resilience activities in Mauritania.

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Transforming the desert through collective resilience work

Miho Mitobe is an international UN Volunteer fully funded by the Government of Japan under the Global Human Resource Development Programme for Peacebuilding and Development (HRD Programme). Serving as an External Relations Officer with the World Food Programme (WFP) in Mauritania, she manages the collaboration with external partners to meet WFP's strategic objectives. In this article, Miho shares her journey in Bassikounou, working with WFP in its humanitarian support to communities affected by climate change.

A UN Volunteer's journey in south-eastern Mauritania

Sitting by the window on my first flight with the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) *en route* to Bassikounou, in the south-eastern part of

the country, all I could see was the vast Sahara Desert. As I got off the airplane during a stop-over in Kiffa, heat blew into my face. The sand was playing with the wind. There was no shade. And it was about 45 degrees Celsius. The question on my mind was: how can people survive — and thrive — in a desert?

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WFP's Food Assistance for Assets (FFA) programmes are part of the answer. These initiatives — in which people receive cash to meet their needs as they work on the construction or rehabilitation of community assets — help strengthen the capacity of communities to cope with the negative effects of climate change. They involve transforming hectares of desert land for productive use, and training people in effective agricultural practices based on soil conditions.



In the Bassikounou area, WFP and UNICEF implement joint activities that promote resilience in the face of a harsh climate. Interventions — ranging from school feeding programmes, nutrition plans for breastfeeding women and children, or WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) initiatives — differ from site to site, but they all share a similar *raison d'être*: addressing climate challenges and food insecurity, especially during the lean season.

“ Until recently, my family could not make ends meet and my kids were hungry,” says Seleckhe Sawk, a small business owner and mother of four in the village of Elberiyé Debaye.

She is one of the 25,874 participants in WFP’s resilience programmes in Mauritania. “But our whole life changed after we got involved in the construction of dykes; I became a woman with construction skills,” she adds. “Thanks to the cash I received from WFP, I could also start my own small

business, selling sugar and rice at a village market. The money I earn helps my family."

The construction of dykes will benefit the whole community, as it will allow for better control of water runoff for domesticated animals and agricultural use in the long term.

Behind the scenes

One thing I was always interested in was visiting the WFP warehouse — the backbone of WFP operations. In the Bassikounou warehouse, row upon row of food sacks and boxes sit on top of pallets to avoid humidity from the ground.

Here, WFP stores especially nutritious foods, nutrient enhancements, rice, salt, and COVID-19 prevention kits. These items are destined mostly for Malian refugees at the Mbera camp, school canteens, people affected by malnutrition, as well as for communities participating in the resilience programmes.



Working hand in hand

A very important element of resilience work in this area — which came clearly through during my visit — is how humanitarian organizations work together towards the common goal of strengthening people’s livelihoods. This is increasing social cohesion in a region where the presence of refugees places further strains on already scarce natural resources, and is reducing pressure on nature, creating a win-win situation for all involved.

“ I’m proud to be part of the *race* against climate change, and to advocate for the well-being and dignity of people affected by it.

So that is how people can survive — and thrive — in a desert. It’s about complementary activities, decided through community-based participatory planning, that tackle different facets of the problem. Acting together is what can change the future.

This article was initially published by [WFP Mauritania](#). Miho served through the Global Human Resource Development Programme for Peacebuilding and Development (HRD) of the Government of Japan.

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