

# "COMMON GROUND"

A study on how building social cohesion led to economic independence through shared land ownership for women in Mauritania.

MAURITANIA  
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FONADH representative filling in conflict evaluation questionnaire with project participants in Fess – February 2023

## I. Summary and Introduction

Concordis International (Concordis) has been working since 2013 in Mauritania's Senegal River Valley to **encourage the communities living there to resolve their differences and coexist peacefully to mutual economic benefit**. This process aimed to overcome historical inter-community rifts that reached their peak during the 'events' of 1989. The conflict was characterised by a deep-seated disagreement over use of natural resources and land ownership.

Initiating a process of dialogue and mediation, Concordis worked in partnership with local NGO Forum des Organisations Nationales de Droits Humains (FONADH) **to enable the conflicting parties to overcome their differences and re-establish progressive and inclusive channels of communication, including along ethnic, gender and age lines**. Today, project participants testify that social cohesion is stronger than ever, as is the shared management of natural resources to mutual benefit. Social cohesion is clearly visible in social ties, for instance, in the multiplicity of intercommunity marriages.

**The strengthening of social cohesion has been accompanied by unprecedented social changes affecting women in particular**. Intercommunity income-generating activities (IGAs) chosen by the participants have been set up thanks to and in support of this social cohesion. The case of market gardens - this emblematic "common ground" - is described in detail in this study.

Once a source of conflict, these areas of land have become, through dialogue, the subject of community agreements and have been given to multi-community women's cooperatives for their joint agricultural work. It provides women with financial independence that contributes to their growing autonomy, although it does contribute to their existing workload. Agricultural work is now added to domestic work, which is not subject to task-sharing.

This study is based on information collected throughout Concordis' successive projects in the three Mauritanian regions of Trarza, Brakna and Gorgol, in addition to a detailed review of existing literature. It is also based on testimonies collected from project participants, partners and national actors.

The study identifies how **the dividends of peacebuilding go hand in hand with a change in attitudes and behaviours, particularly regarding women**, allowing them to become more independent, more important in decision-making processes, and progressively more able to access to land ownership. This is an unprecedented in a country where the sector is dominated by men and land issues remain complex, despite the many reforms undertaken.

It also highlights the successes achieved by Concordis working with communities in the three regions continuously over the last decade. **It sets out the key reasons behind these achievements, in order to capitalise on and disseminate good practice**. It is important to note that in each of the 31 villages covered by the project, social cohesion is now well established. However, the peace dividend is not the same everywhere. In some villages, community agreements have not yet been formalised or countersigned by the authorities. The resulting IGAs are unevenly developed: for example, land has been identified in some villages, but not yet officially transferred to women's organisations. We have chosen to focus on the eight villages where the change has been most successful in order to fully understand the reasoning behind such.

From our study, we have outlined ten key aspects that allowed us to achieve success. These points will be developed in detail at the end of this document.

## Ten key elements that contributed to the success of the programme

1

A long-term intervention to build trust with the communities involved in the project

2

An unchanged team

3

A long-term partnership with a national organisation that is well established locally

4

Local mediators appointed by the communities

5

A strategy of small steps which constitute a thoughtful and progressive sequencing of the action

6

Conflict resolution actions are accompanied by inclusive development support measures

7

A peace process controlled and nurtured by the communities themselves

8

Training is offered to women (in land tenure, mediation, leadership, negotiation, etc.) and to men

9

The authorities are consulted and involved at every stage of the project, at national and local level

10

Advocacy with authorities and international organisations to complement Concordis' development work in these areas

« We've never experienced such cohesion. It's the first time we've had a collective project.

Aminetou Mbare farmer in Wendou Mbabaa2 - Menza

## 1. List of Abbreviations

**AC:** *Accords communautaires* (Community Agreements)

**IGR** Income Generating Activities: The plan was to finance some IGAs as a pilot project in order to encourage and consolidate social cohesion through economic interactions. In reality, the communities jointly identified shared IGAs in the form of common property. The women in charge of managing the IGAs are chosen from the two communities, and they are trained in microproject management techniques for better monitoring. The CCCI act as a board of directors.

**CCCI** (*Cadre de Concertation Communautaire Inclusif*): This is a community structure set up at the sites by Concordis, by mutual agreement between the two ethnic groups that were once in conflict. It is inclusive as both ethnic groups are represented, as well as women and youth. It serves to manage village affairs jointly and to resolve any intra- or inter-ethnic conflicts through dialogue. The CCCI also acts as a board of directors for the IGAs, whether financed by the project or other funding structures.

**Community or ethnic group:** Concordis chooses to avoid the term "tribe", which we consider reductive and stereotypical. We prefer the terms "community" or "ethnic group" to refer to a group of people living together, often with the same interests, sharing the same language, the same culture and most often evolving in the same territorial space. In Mauritania, there are four ethnic groups:

- **Moor:** A group practising a dialect of Arabic origin, with survivals of the Berber language. This dialect, common to the two Moorish components in Mauritania, is called Hassania. The Moors, officially the majority in Mauritania, are also found in Niger, Mali, southern Morocco and Algeria. This group is far from homogeneous. The different communities that make up this group have complex ties that are nourished by a rich and tumultuous history. It includes former slaves, the Harratines, and their former masters.
- **Puular / Peulh, Fulani / Haalpularen:** An ethnic group from the Sahel and West Africa, widely dispersed in the region. Inhabiting many countries, they live mainly in West Africa and other countries including the Central Africa Republic and Sudan. They are the second largest ethnic group in Mauritania.
- **Soninké:** Mandingo language ethnic group, West African, found in Mali, Fouta Djallon, southern Mauritania, eastern Senegal, Guinea and Gambia.
- **Wolof** (or Oulof): West African ethnic group found in north-western Senegal, the Gambia and the southwestern coast of Mauritania.

**CSO:** Civil Society Organisation

**FAO:** Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations

**FONADH:** One of the oldest federations of organisations in Mauritania, the Forum des Organisations Nationales de Droits Humains (FONADH) is an NGO that has been working for human rights in Mauritania since 2000. It is composed of 17 national humanitarian associations.

**NGO:** Non-governmental organisation

**Village / Site:** An area of dwellings usually found in a rural setting. It is usually larger than a "hamlet" but smaller than a "city". Concordis' programme has been focusing on 31 villages / sites where conflicts were more prevalent.

## 2. Methodology

To carry out this study, the programme consultant conducted an extensive review of existing literature, particularly on land tenure and women's access to land. An analysis of all the information and knowledge gathered over 10 years of project experience and implementation by Concordis in Mauritania also served as the basis for this report, as well as numerous interviews with the project team and partner involved in implementation to understand the needs and constraints of the programme.

Finally, the Concordis team conducted a 10-day mission to eight villages participating in Concordis' project. One day was spent in each village to conduct focus groups with women and men separately, as well as a visit to the village, its specific facilities, surrounding fields and Concordis-funded equipment. Individual interviews with local (mayor, etc.) and national authorities and with members of FONDADH were also conducted to complete the information collected throughout the project. A total of 96 people took part in these interviews, including 49 women and 47 men, equally divided between the communities and generations present in each village.

## 3. The Author

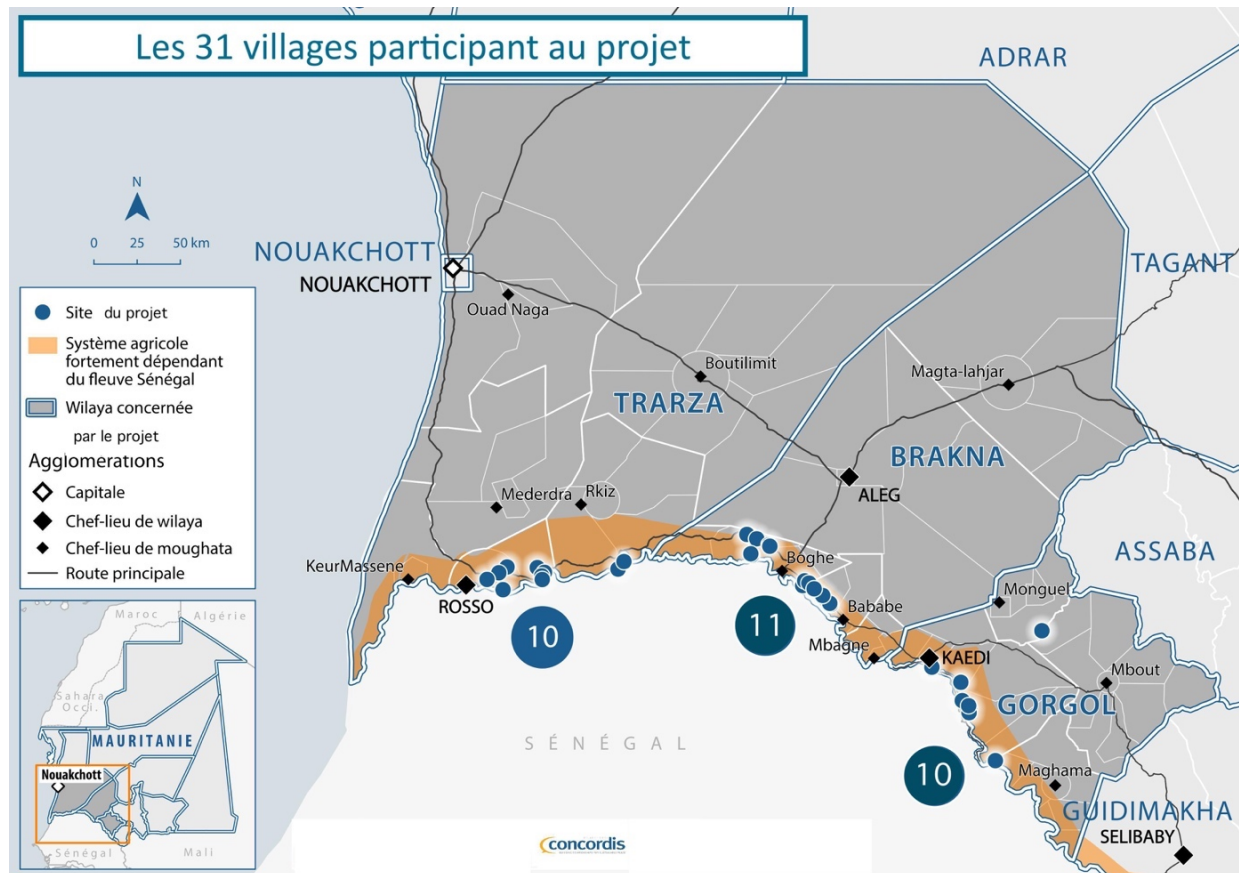
**Hélène Calame** is a consultant specialising in peacebuilding at the intersection with gender. Hélène has carried out several missions as a consultant for Concordis, including in 2017 and again in 2022 as programme officer for Mauritania. In this capacity, she was able to see the changes brought about by the successive projects in the three target regions. This dual perspective, both internal, knowing the project and the organisation, and external, from time spent working in other contexts, has allowed Hélène to step back and look objectively at the results achieved and the progress made, as reported in this study.



*Community dialogue in Keur Madické – Dec 2022*

## II. Context

Concordis' activities in Mauritania since 2013 have been concentrated in 31 villages across **three regions of the Senegal River Valley: Trarza, Brakna and Gorgol.**



This area has the highest rainfall in the country (70% of which is desert) with an average of 500 mm of rainfall per year. The presence of the river allows cultivation by irrigation. As a result, many land and social interests are at stake for the different resident communities including the Moors, the Haalpularen, the Soninkés and the Wolofs. **These communities compete very closely for space, water and other natural resources.**

The 1983 land reform, which sought to improve the situation by modernising access to land ownership, helped to ignite grievances in an area already under social and economic tension. This led to the 'events' of 1989: violent clashes, forced displacement of the region's Puular, Soninkés and Wolofs communities towards Senegal and the re-distribution of their land to certain Moorish communities. When those displaced were repatriated to Mauritania – according to the UN Refugee Agency, around 30,000 people returned to Mauritania between 2008 and 2012 – they found other communities in their place. This created great tension and conflict, which was particularly acute in the sites selected by Concordis and FONADH to be the focus of their work in this project.

The village of Bowel 1, for example, experienced many deaths in the 1990s due to inter-community clashes. In the village of Mourtogal and Rotiet, the arrival of the repatriated communities (Puulars) took place in a very tense atmosphere: they found their land had been occupied by others (notably the Moors) for twenty years and they were resettled in very difficult living conditions. This situation gave rise to a great deal of mistrust between the communities and tensions over land. "Each community lived

*in isolation and without any contact with the other",* say the inhabitants of Keur Madické. In some villages in Trarza, the returnees, upon their return organised by the UNHCR, refused to get out of the vehicles until they were taken directly to the land from which they had been expelled some twenty years earlier.

On the other hand, in the village of Keur Madiké, the inhabitants of the two communities, Maures and Wolofs, explain that their ancestors lived in good harmony and that links existed between them before these "events", which they blame primarily on the state. In Mourtogal and Rotiet, the Moorish community that remained in the village continued to live side by side with the few Puulars who remained (most were expelled). During these troubled times, the Moors protected the remaining Puulars against, for example, herd theft.

However, this did not prevent friction when the displaced returned. In Djoli, the reunited communities lacked communication and facilitated no joint activities. *"Our communities did not know each other; we were afraid of each other"* explain the women in Wendou Mbabaa2 - Menza.

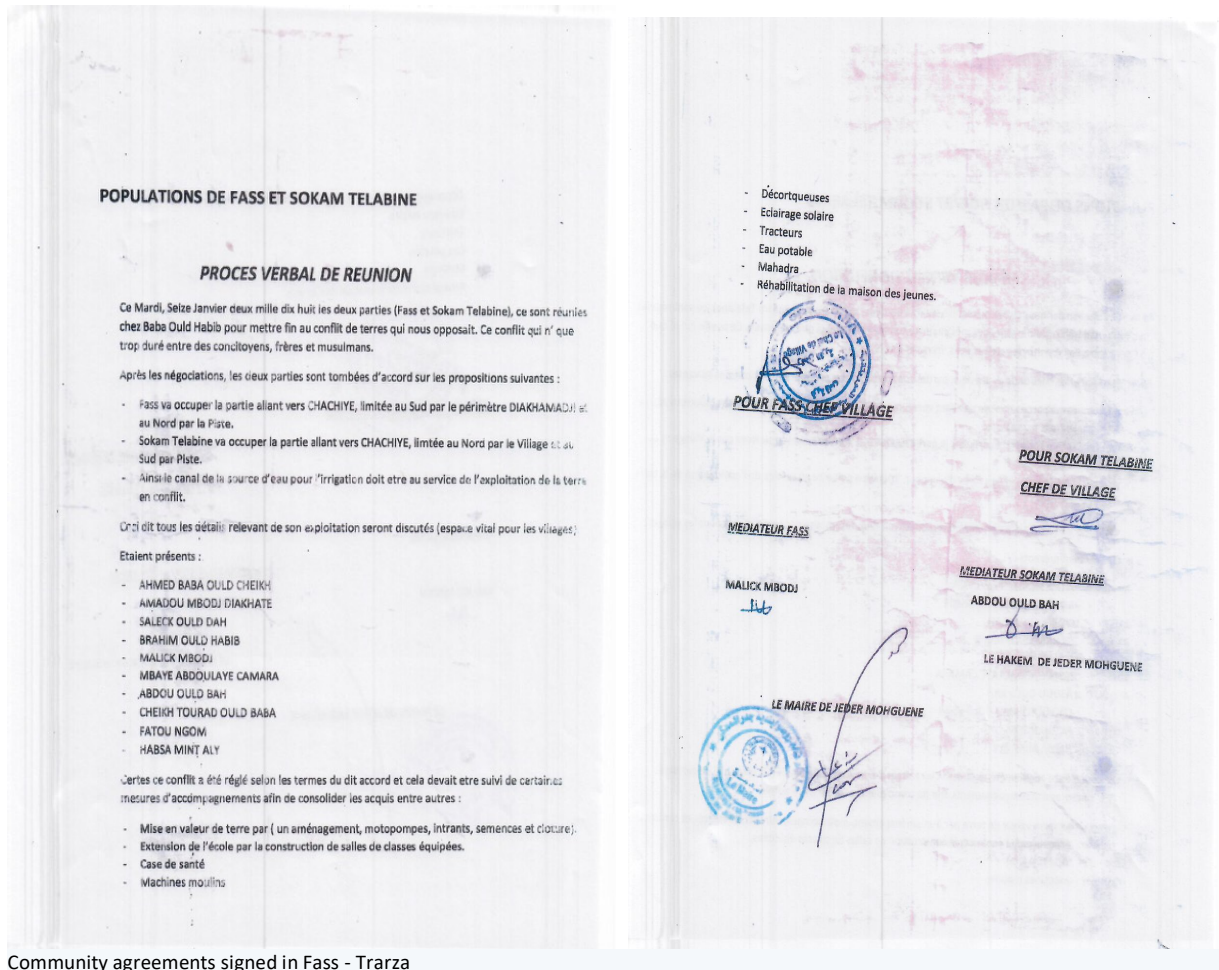
Most of the villages in this study have two names: a Hassanie name for the Maure side, and a Fulani or Wolof name for the other side, illustrating the antagonism existing both in people's minds and in geography via a symbolic border in each village, which nobody crossed.

The Concordis project intervened from 2013 onwards with **the intention of breaking down prejudices and re-establishing intercommunity links through dialogue and mediation.** Members of Concordis' national partner organisation, FONADH, formed the mediation team, which Concordis trained and accompanied throughout the process. These stakeholders initially met with each of the communities separately. Each party designated a community representative to attend the discussions and this person received training in mediation, conflict management and dialogue techniques. *"The process was not easy",* according to Mahmoud, deputy chief of the village of Keur Madiké, *"During the first meetings, the Moors refused to hand over the land (that the state had given them when the Fulani left) to the Fulani. Many meetings between the communities were organised thanks to Concordis and FONADH."*

**"The project encouraged meetings and discussions and helped to overcome past tensions. It made people aware of the importance of social cohesion and strengthened the desire to live together again"**  
**Men in Mourtogal and Rotiet**

Strong messages were passed on by the FONADH mediators, insisting that progress depended on communities working together on shared solutions: *"if you don't come together, even the state will do nothing for you", "without a protocol of agreement, you won't be able to cultivate your disputed land"* and *"development will be compromised if you don't get along"*. In the end, it was the realism of these communities that brought them together. In this area of great poverty, the idea gradually took hold in the minds of the communities: **without harmony between them, there would be no progress for anyone.**





Community agreements signed in Fass - Trarza

Concordis organised inter-community income-generating activities (IGAs) in order to demonstrate that, if there was agreement between groups, a further step towards socio-economic development could be achieved. As the women of the village of Wouro Amadou Hawa Dia - Hay Mansour testify: *"The sewing activity has helped to bring us together and, what's more, we no longer need to travel to Senegal to have our clothes sewn!"*

Mahmoud in Keur Madiké says that what struck him most was the notion of "concession", allowing parties in conflict to come to an agreement, as long as they compromise. *"You can't be too rigid,"* he explained to his community. A major concession was made in this village, for example, regarding the use of standpipes: the slope of the land meant that the water supply on the Moorish side flowed less quickly than on the Wolof side. The two communities finally agreed to use the two standpipes on a rotating basis to meet their respective needs.

Today, **inter-community relations are good in the 31 villages covered by the project.** An agreement has been signed or is in the process of being signed between the communities. In most cases this has also been ratified by the local authorities (mayor or wali). This document formalises the agreement between the communities in writing. It also lists the problems which, in the opinion of everyone, hinder the development of the whole village. This agreed list is an objective for the communities to work towards: by their own collective means, combined with external help, if necessary, they can find a remedy for these obstacles together.

Key to the sustainability of the programme is the fact that a conflict resolution mechanism is now permanently in place to deal with the tensions and conflicts that arise in any normal society. Today, when tensions arise, the CCCI, composed of village mediators and FONADH representatives, are on hand to help those in conflict to find a solution. FONADH says: *"Thanks to the work carried out during the project, it is now very easy to organise dialogue sessions. Communities now willingly come to attend"*. Dialogue has become a systematically preferred mode of mediation.

*"Our ties are now stronger than those of our ancestors,"* says Moctar Ould Ahmed in the village of Mourtogal and Rotiet. *"This shows us that we can always overcome our differences. This requires that people talk, socialise and work together"*.

“It is thanks to Concordis that we have found social peace and that we share this land. Now that we are together, we can do everything. We live in perfect symbiosis”

**The inhabitants of Fass**

“Today we live in harmony, we are all united, we have the same word, we do everything together”

**The inhabitants of Wendou Mbabaa2 - Menza**

Many people gave concrete examples of ways their lives had been improved by better relations between the communities. The communities help each other in their daily lives, for example in the fields. In Bowel 1, the Moors lend land to the Fulani if they need it, particularly when the water in the river recedes and irrigation is difficult. The fodder reserve is a common asset. They share everything, including infrastructure: such as a mosque, school, borehole, fields etc.

In Keur Madiké, the process has greatly strengthened the links among women. The women now meet every Thursday at their respective homes to organise activities - *"now the women feel at ease among themselves"* explain the women in Wendou Mbabaa2 - Menza. In the village of Mourtogal and Rotiet, the women practice rain-fed farming together, in symbiosis, on fields belonging to the Maures. A women's cooperative common to both communities was created in 2022, to provide a framework for joint agricultural work.

As well as shared economic activity, there is also increased social interaction. Meetings are held together, while ceremonies – such as weddings and funerals – are also attended together. Moreover, *"marriages between communities have become common"* says Mahmoud, which no longer surprises anyone, whereas a few years ago these same communities lacked basic communication. Today, the communities are linked by marriages and inter-family unions, meaning it is very unlikely for the conflict to resume.

*"The brotherhood, the openness is great. Thanks to the project, people have found each other, they understand each other, they have trusting, sincere relationships and feel a sense of peace and love"*

*between them. Now they socialise with each other, go to each other's meetings, have many projects together. We have bonded together. Today we are brothers. When we need help, we help each other"* state the women in Ganki Doumbodji. In Djoli, the dialogue allows harmony and solidarity between the communities that interact constantly.

"The break between the communities is no longer possible," says Mahmoud. The children of these unions are mixed. "When you look at the other person, you no longer see a Moor or a Wolof but, through him, your own child or grandchild.

**This paves the way for social cohesion between members of the future generation, especially as these children now share the same schools.**



**Previously the chief of the village on the Moorish side, Mahmoud preferred to unite with the chief of the Fulani village and become his deputy.**

The significance of this gesture can be measured only by taking into account the social and economic weight bestowed on an individual by the position of village chief, whose capacity for influence confers significant power.

Throughout this process, **the issue of land ownership was a knot that was particularly difficult to untie, as antagonisms over land were very deep. However, the communities ended up agreeing on a collective use of these resources,** beneficial for all, including for women, although the legislative and traditional land tenure context in Mauritania is still not favourable to women.

### III. Case Study: The Market Gardens, A “Common Ground”

#### Law, land tradition and the role of cooperatives

Mauritania's 1983 land reform sought to “strengthen the law of the state at the expense of that of tribes and social groups”<sup>1</sup> by abolishing traditional land ownership.

In reality, traditional practice and the law were rather overlapping. In many cases, especially in rural areas, communities owned some land acquired by customary means, but this ownership was not legally validated, usually due to a lack of knowledge of the procedure, which is extremely long and complex, and due to a lack of resources. The administrative services that are supposed to facilitate access to land are sometimes corrupt and not very accessible to the population. The work of popularising and educating communities about the land law is incomplete, or even lacking. As a result, most of these communities do not have legal land titles and are therefore in a precarious situation (risk of eviction etc.).

Faced with this problem, one of the practices that seeks to reconcile the two systems, or even 'convert' the traditional system to the new legal order, is the formation of local cooperatives. The cooperative will own the land, enabling its members to farm land collectively.<sup>2</sup> This is a form of compromise established in the face of the difficulties of access to individual land ownership, despite reform.

In the 1984 circular from the Ministry of the Interior applying Ordinance 83.127 addressed to local authorities, the State specifies that “communities should be invited to organise themselves into regular cooperatives if they wish to keep their land undivided or if, for technical or economic reasons, it has not been possible to carry out sharing operations”<sup>3</sup>. Thus, if people cannot become individual owners, they can form cooperatives to convert traditional landholdings, often on a community basis, into legal land ownership.

Cooperatives play a key role in structuring women's work on the land: “Although their socio-economic activities are hampered by land insecurity, women are mainly engaged in agriculture, gardening, gathering and collecting wood, all of which are essential for improving food security. The current land registration system allows smallholders – especially women – in rural areas to register their property in the name of their cooperative as collective land. For the last two decades, agricultural production in the valley has been carried out by cooperatives, whether male, female or mixed. The strengthening of the role of the cooperative has been beneficial to women as it has enabled them to access larger tracts of land, credit (through internal savings) and to organise themselves for government and donor support. Women's cooperatives have therefore expressed a strong interest in acquiring permanent titles to the land they cultivate in order to secure their investments.”<sup>4</sup>

This trend has recently been reinforced by the simplification of collective access to land ownership - with the status of '*Groupement d'Intérêt Économique*' which would further facilitate the procedure for obtaining land titles for areas of less than five hectares. This would provide a legal framework for communities to access and work with land. Usually, these cooperatives are based on community and traditional lines.

We will see that, in the case of Concordis' project, the cooperative route was chosen spontaneously by the communities, and in particular by women's groups **from different communities**, to move towards land ownership.

The specific case of market gardens demonstrates the key steps towards social cohesion, its impact on gender relations and women's access to land ownership. In six of the 31 villages involved in the project, the dialogue process resulted in workable solutions that exceeded the expectations of Concordis and

<sup>1</sup> <https://books.openedition.org/cjb/1277> : Entre droit, islam et pratiques quotidiennes : la complexité du foncier.

<sup>2</sup> <https://books.openedition.org/cjb/1309> Le rôle des coopératives villageoises dans l'appropriation du foncier rural

<sup>3</sup> idem

<sup>4</sup> <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/904151468189238737/pdf/100049-FRENCH-WP-PUBLIC-Box393216B-Womens-access-to-land-in-Mauritania.pdf>

FONADH: communities that had previously been in conflict chose to pool disputed land and hand it over to a multi-community women's cooperative in the village so that they could grow vegetables collectively. Six plots of land were the subject of a community agreement, totalling 16 hectares in all (see orange box below).

**Trarza**  
**Djioli : 2ha**  
**Keur Madické : 4ha**  
**Fass : 4ha**

**Brakna**  
**Wendou Mbabaa 2 : 2ha**

**Gorgol**  
**Bowel 1 : 2ha**  
**Ganki Doumbodji : 2ha**

In Fass, after many multi-community meetings, the women agreed among themselves and succeeded in convincing the men to give them a piece of land. In Wendou Mbabaa2 - Menza, the women explain: *“first we had to create this union among ourselves. Then the Concordis project asked us to choose what we wanted to do together. After discussions between us and with the Moors, we obtained the availability of this piece of land. It was the village chiefs of both communities who decided to give it to the women. The garden is between the two villages, part of it is taken from the land of each of the two communities”*.

In Bowel 1, as in other villages, it was social cohesion stimulated by investment throughout Concordis' project that made the idea of shared land possible and operational. *“It was the agreement of the village that made it possible to obtain the market garden perimeter. It has become a collective land.”* Said the men.

In this village, the land devoted to market gardening for women was originally cultivated only by the Moors. Then, when the Fulani women returned, they were gradually involved in the cultivation of the garden. Through dialogue, the Moors understood the value of making it available to women from both communities. In Wouro Amadou Hawa Dia - Hay Mansour, villagers explain *“now we have a strong link: the collective land that we obtained thanks to dialogue”*.

For Mahmoud, the deputy chief of the village of Keur Madiké, the decision was taken to give land to the women in order to provide a concrete project shared by the communities, which would be a concrete proof of their agreement. He emphasises that this is a special effort for the villagers as there is not enough space available for cultivation around the village to create other shared land apart from that handed over by the Fulani village chief at the instigation of Concordis. He sees this as a test of social cohesion: *“will the communities be able to maintain social cohesion through this collective project?”*

In Bowel 1, the Moorish village chief, who is also a community mediator, handed over the land to the women's cooperative 'to promote peace and harmony and with a view to development above all', as in Mourtogal and Rotiet, where Moctar Ould Ahmed says: *“anything that can bind the two communities together, we will do. **We are guardians of social cohesion”***.

The market garden thus appears to be both the outcome of the conflict resolution process and the fruit of social cohesion: it is also the embodiment of this process and a guarantee for the future, since the cooperative can only draw resources from the field if there is agreement between the communities.



"The collective garden came at the right time to materialise our agreement, it is thanks to dialogue that we obtained it. We have never known such cohesion; it is the first time we have a common project"

**Villagers from Ganki Doumbodji**

To encourage this process of social cohesion and income generating activity, Concordis provided the necessary fencing, irrigation and other equipment for the women to cultivate the land. Once the equipment was in place, the women cleared the land by hand. Onions, aubergines, tomatoes, cabbage, okra and sorghum are now growing on the land, with the first harvest taking roughly two months. Speaking about Concordis' action to achieve social cohesion by supporting an IGA, the women of Djioli emphasise: *"This is the first time an NGO has done this"*.

#### **How this works in practice**

The organisation of the multi-community women's cooperative supervising the market gardening is solid and shows a far-sighted economic system: the land is subdivided into small plots, and the women sell the produce from their market gardening work individually. Part of the profits are pooled for reinvestment and the surplus goes to each woman. In Wendou Mbabaa2 - Menza, the joint profits will be used to finance an inter-community shop that will be run on a rotating basis by two women from the two communities. The women intend to share the profits between reinvestment in the shop, market gardening and personal expenses.

In Fass, part of the profits from the garden will be put into a common fund to save and "start the next crops independently so that, in time, we become independent of our husbands and NGOs", detail the women of the cooperative.

**An economy of empowerment is taking place. In all areas, women show the same desire for independence.** In Djioli, the Fulani village chief made a four-hectare plot of land available to the women at their request. They formed a cooperative called "Danta" ("Union") and took the initiative to take out an annual loan from the Agricultural Bank to start their farming activity. Thanks to the profits from the harvest or through individual contributions, they always manage to repay the loan and have done so for several years.

The case of the market gardens represents an important outcome for the project and for the communities in the process of social cohesion. It also leads to important questions about attitudes to land ownership, particularly women's.

This study therefore sought to understand whether the transfer of land by community agreement was considered to equate to women's ownership of that land. And, if so, what are the terms of that ownership? This raised another broader question on the evolution of women's land ownership in these villages in southern Mauritania.

## IV. Towards an Expansion of Women's Access to Land Ownership in Mauritania?

Women in Mauritania have been legally entitled to own land since the 1983 land reform and all the legal texts adopted since then make no distinction between sexes.

In practice, however, women are particularly disadvantaged in accessing land ownership, as they represented only 7.9% of registered title holders in 2015. Of the 49 women interviewed for this study, only one claims to own a piece of land: Ammar Jewda from the village of Bowel 1 received a piece of land from her husband. She has since started the process of obtaining the land title.

There is no legal measure to remedy this de facto imbalance in access. This is due to several factors:

- Women are often more affected by poverty and lack of education, which reinforces the difficulties of attaining land ownership (impossibility of buying land, lack of knowledge around land law, etc.).
- Women are kept away from the decision-making spheres and therefore do not have the opportunity to make their voice heard when it comes to distributing or redistributing land resources or to advance their cause at other levels.

In addition, it is important to understand the extent to which communities are competing with one another for land. Access to land for agriculture or for grazing impacts not only survival, but also the definition of identity, regardless of ethnicity or gender. This defines the relationships between individuals, their means of integration and development through access to natural resources.

Also, in rural areas where the state administration is less present, traditional notions of property ownership take precedence over land law. When communities consider that their land is under threat, this reinforces their tendency to "land protectionism", to the detriment of women. "Most communities deprive women of land inheritance to prevent family property from falling into the hands of people from outside the group by way of succession".

In certain situations, such as a divorce, widowhood or inheritance, women are often ignored or forced to give up their share, whether by tradition, family or community pressure not to 'scatter' the land concerned, to protect family harmony or to maintain the rights of male descendants. Women thus operate a mechanism of sacrifice and renunciation.

This is evident in the literature on the subject, but also in the interviews conducted for this study. In the interviews, men claim that women "...have the right, but they don't claim it", and women add "we sacrifice ourselves so that our children can inherit land."

By custom, when a woman marries, she must leave the home and join another family, she will be looked after by another man. To let the woman keep her share of the land would be to jeopardise the integrity of the family and community's land ownership.

Moreover, according to traditional Mauritanian patriarchal logic, it is the brother who takes charge of the family when the father dies. He maintains the mother and pays the family's expenses. This is why the woman leaves the ownership of land to him. In Fass, the men added that the reason why the woman gives land to her brothers is also because traditionally she is seen as not having the strength to work the land herself.



However, some women point out that although they are not the owner of the land, they can still work it and earn income from it. Women can also receive a small share of the profits and, if the land is sold, their share of the sale.

“  
 'This is the first time that the two communities have agreed to make land available to women together'  
 Villagers from Wouro Amadou  
 Hawa Dia - Hay Mansour  
 ”

In Mourtogal and Rotiet it is stated that some women do not give their share of the inheritance to the men and keep it, for example if they are in need, or if they are divorced or heads of their household. This is the case for some women, for example in Djioli. That said, it is not always well accepted by the entourage or the community.

It is understood that **traditional attitudes are mixed with deep-rooted gender stereotypes**: men in Djioli describe women as, “bad land managers”, they do

not trust them to preserve the integrity of the land: “women sell the land carelessly”.

However, in the course of the discussion, nuances are gradually introduced: a distinction is made between educated women and others, and men admit that some of their male peers are not good land managers either.

Alioune Aba Sy's conclusion that **“women can lead men, and vice versa, it is a question of competence”** opens the possibility of a change in gender relations and, consequently, of women's access to land ownership. This is evidenced by the fact that several communities, and in particular the men who own the land, have decided to hand over part of it to women's cooperatives.

In most villages, this transfer seems to constitute a willingness to the possibility of collective land ownership by women, with nuances depending on the place. In Mourtogal and Rotiet, men say, *“the land allocated as a market garden belongs collectively to the women and men”*. In Djioli, the title to the land concerned remains in the possession of the village chief, but it is considered to be a loan of unlimited duration, which will extend to future generations.

For some, they are clear that the land will now be passed on to future generations of women – provided that it remains beneficial to everyone, and that social cohesion continues to be such as to allow efficient working of the land.

For example, in Wendou Mbabaa 2 - Menza, *“the land that has been given to the women will be passed on from generation to generation, provided that it remains profitable”*.

In Keur Madiké, as in Fass, this transfer of land to women is definitive. One of the women in the focus group states: *“this land will be passed on to my daughter if I die. This is the first time we can own land (collectively) as women.”*

With the support of Concordis and CCCI, the board of the multi-community women's cooperative organising the work around the land was appointed during one of the dialogue sessions. The women of Fass are taking steps to formalise this property on a long-term basis: *“Our cooperative 'Diapo' now has an elected office. We are aware that land without title can be taken over. This is the first step towards the cooperative becoming an Economic Interest Group (EIG) and thus claiming collective ownership of the women in this market garden area (see box)”*.

There are, of course, limits and risk factors in this development: achieving collective ownership is no easy task for these women, only a minority of whom are literate. Most of the time, they require support from the village chief, the CCCI or other people with links to the local authorities to make the process work. Moreover, depending on the location of the village, they are more or less isolated - some villages, such as Ganki Doumbodji, are completely surrounded by water in the rainy season, and only boats can be used to travel outside the village - which does not make it any easier to formalise ownership.



"Today is the beginning of empowerment. I believe that, in the future, I will be able to own land."

**Awa Moctar Diallo,  
farmer in the village of  
Wendou Mbabaa2 – Menza**

Moreover, one may wonder about this notion of collective property: is it a stopgap for the women? Is it not a meagre satisfaction in the absence of individual ownership?

These questions are legitimate. However, this does not prevent some, like Awa Moctar Diallo at Wendou Mbabaa2 - Menza, from highlighting the significant steps they have achieved (see photo). And one of the participants in Wouro Amadou Hawa Dia - Hay Mansour hopes: *"Before, women did not cultivate, today they cultivate, so why shouldn't they be able to own land?"*

The case study of the market gardens shows that changes in behaviour, gender relations and women's status can be brought about gradually, inclusively and by the communities themselves, within the framework of a project like that implemented by Concordis. Building a solid community agreement based on a deeply rooted dialogue mechanism seems to have contributed to the step-by-step progress towards women's land ownership. A direct approach on gender and against tradition, possibly seen as externally driven, would have been disrespectful, unrealistic and probably counter-productive.



*A woman posing in front of her herd in Keur Madické - Dec 2022*

## V. From Building Social Cohesion to Changing Gender Attitudes and Behaviour

Many of the testimonies collected for this study speak of the changes in mentality that are taking place regarding the place of women in rural Mauritanian society. They all indicate that the **role of women and gender relations have evolved over the last ten years**. The question was to understand how the activities supported by Concordis have encouraged these changes.

In Wendou Mbabaa<sup>2</sup> - Menza the men interviewed said: *"We have made a lot of progress towards the emancipation of women"*. Today women have greater freedom: *"my husband no longer prevents me"*, says Aïssata Dembodja in Bowel 1 with a smile. In Ganki Doumbodji, the women explain: *"There is now an understanding between the man and the woman, it is no longer the same submission as before when the woman did not express herself. Today it is the beginning of emancipation"*. The men echoed: *"We want women to be autonomous and to flourish. We are the women. Anything a man can do; a woman can do"*. Others say: *'Men have made concessions. They are forced to accept change'*. Moreover, it is notable that both boys and girls are now being sent to school and to study and have been for some years. About 10 years ago, boys were favoured when it came to making a choice and most of the time girls did not go to school.



Women posing in front of the project sign and shared land with their farming tools - Dec 2022 - Fass

Many interviewees emphasised that men are now aware of women's economic power and their ability to work and redistribute the resulting resources to the family. *"Men have understood that women must work. It is a gain for us and for the whole community. If the woman harvests, she will give to the men. The man alone cannot do everything, we need to complement each other. A hand cannot wash itself"*,

says Ba Hamadou. Therefore, while the women of the previous generation were confined to domestic work and raising children, today most of them work in the fields, while carrying out domestic tasks in addition to a secondary trade (sewing, commerce, etc.). *"Before, women were only at home, today they do more than men, they can't manage alone"*, explain the women of Fass.

This "freedom to work" allows them to generate their own income, which is an important part of family life since "the woman takes care of 60% of the family", according to one of the participants in Bowel 1. Some of them say that they generate this extra income from the market garden produce, sold as part of the project. This gives them independence and autonomy in the way they manage their lives: *"Thanks to the market garden, which is worked all year round, the women have a continuous activity and more income than the men who only work during the agricultural season"* state the women in Ganki Doumbodji. Such IGAs improve the situation of the women, who sell the vegetables in Kaédi and share the profits. With this additional income, the children's education and studies, their clothing and food can be financed. Women do not just decide how to spend their own income, they invest to save and create other resources. Dembo Saw in Ganki Doumbodji explains: *"Thanks to the market garden crops, I bought sheep and I was able to buy for the festival, I went from two to four sheep, it is an investment"*. Aïcha Sidi Mohamed bought seven goats: *"They are my property. I buy what is necessary for my family, I don't give the money I earn to my husband. I am independent"* and Fatma adds: *"I save by buying animals, my income allows me to finance the education of my children, their needs. I take care of most of the family's expenses"*. For Siate Monsel, *"The man just takes care of the daily expenses, I have ambitions, what I earn I do what I want with it, I invest it, it is for my own needs"*.

Many even recognise that women are the real drivers of the household, seemingly reversing traditional gender roles. Women are now taking over the functions that men used to perform. *"I just have to wear the trousers"* laughs Maimouna Mint Boulheir in Keur Madické. In Fass, *"the place of men has been taken by women, women are more active than men. They are the ones who force us to go to the fields, the men are conditioned by the women"*, says Alioune Aba Sy. In Djoli, one of the participants says: *"My husband encourages me and congratulates me. I am the one who feeds the children, he has nothing, so he can only congratulate me"*.

Fathers now encourage children to turn to their mothers for payment of their daily expenses and ask their wives to support them financially. *"My husband asks me to give him money when he has to travel"* says Awa Baidi in Wendou Mbabaa2 - Menza and *"When my husband wanted to build a new house, he asked for my advice and my contribution to the costs"*, describes Fatimetou Mohamed in Wendou Mbabaa2 - Menza.

Nevertheless, some participants show that the evolution of their condition is double-edged: women now support and help men in the field, but the opposite is not true for domestic work. It seems that the Mauritanian tradition which requires women to serve their husbands in the home is still very much alive. Siate Monsel describes this paradox as follows: *"We women are submissive, even though at home we consult with my husband"*.



"Today men listen to us and respect us, they have understood the importance of women's participation in the family. They have understood our value."

**Salimata Dia, farmer and trader, president of the Peul women's cooperative of Mourtogal and Rotiet.**

Thus, the physical hardship felt by women is increased. However, the testimonies show that the prospect of greater autonomy thanks to the new income from this work prevails. Most of the participants in Keur Madické are happy to have gained independence: *"it gives me courage", "despite the fatigue, I know that I earn my own income", "I earn something that belongs to me, I no longer need to ask for help"*.

In Fass, one of the women explains *"I don't wait for my husband to give me money, I can even give gifts and clothes to my husband. My husband and I discuss how I spend my money, and so does he"*. In this way, women also gain in importance in decision-making: *"They are the ones who dictate the needs of the household"*, say the men. Oumar Daouda adds: *"In the village, if a meeting has to be organised, the men consult with the women first. For all decisions, the women are in front, otherwise they are not behind"*.

An exchange is therefore taking place in which the woman, the family's main economic provider, now has a say. In Mourtogal and Rotiet, the men explain: *"In the past, the man worked and provided the family's income alone. Nowadays, the woman also brings in income, so she cannot be excluded."*

In Fass, the focus group women participants say *"All decisions are taken in consultation with women, whereas before men did not ask their opinion. Today it is a give and take"*. *"The greater the economic participation, the greater the consideration,"* admits Hamidou Alassane Diallo. In Wendou Mbabaa2 - Menza, the men interviewed said: *"The women are involved in all decisions, everything is shared with them. Women's ideas are taken into account."*

The actions of Concordis in **encouraging dialogue between communities and between men and women create the conditions for these developments to take place, as listed below:**

- Establishing social cohesion and the commitment of communities was an important first step for the advancement of women. In times of conflict, gender stereotypes tend to be reinforced and women are the first direct or collateral victims of conflict, which can lead to an increase in gender-based violence, deterioration of living conditions related to food, education, access to health care, etc.
- As explained above, the strong social cohesion brought about by the project allows women to access land and even for such land to be shared between communities. Thanks to the income generated by their agricultural work on these plots, they have more authority within their relationships and broader family structures. Their voice counts. According to FONADH, within the community and village, "women have an impact *collectively*", they are now systematically consulted when decisions are made and collective activities are organised, if only because they have more resources than men to finance them: "*When an activity has to be organised in the village, the men turn to us women because we have more resources*" say the women in Wouro Amadou Hawa Dia - Hay Mansour.
- The introduction of dialogue as a method of conflict resolution has increased communication between men and women. Renewed dialogue has not only provided a method, but a pathway forward that forges an inter-community link and bridge between genders in collective decision making. In other words, "*the road has been paved*". Women were systematically involved in community dialogues, although in the initial stages of the project they did not actively participate due to a number of obstacles. However, thanks to the training and encouragement of mediators, they have gradually played a significant role in conflict resolution. In Ganki Doumbodji, the inhabitants state that "*women have distinguished themselves in the resolution of conflicts, they call men to order.*" In Wouro Amadou Hawa Dia - Hay Mansour, they explain: "*In the dialogue sessions, the women manage to get their ideas across. They are not just there to listen, they participate. Everyone is on the same level of information; the conclusion is made together.*" This is gradually reflected in the way women's voices are taken into account in family, community and village life. The men of Bowel 1 explain: "*Women play an important role and they take part in decision making. They have a voice in the village, when they need to do activities, the whole village joins them*".
- Many of the people we met mentioned how these actions were aided by the training received by the women, which equips them to know their rights and to acquire negotiation techniques, dialogue and leadership skills: "*Thanks to the actions of Concordis and especially thanks to the training, the women are more assertive, they have a voice that counts*". "*Thanks to the trainings, we have understood our rights,*" says Fatou Misin Diakhate.





## VI. Ten Key Elements that Contributed to the Success of the Programme

This programme was highly successful in transforming conflict between two disenfranchised groups, generating peaceful and mutually beneficial relationships between them. It was also successful in transforming attitudes around women's ownership of land and position in civic governance.

It is therefore worth reflecting on how this transformation was possible and what lessons can be learned:

1. A long-term intervention, across almost ten years, which has allowed the Concordis and FONADH team to build trust with the communities involved in the project. During this period, the team has proved to the project participants that the investment in them is real, and they are core beneficiaries.
2. An unchanged team of Concordis and FONADH staff across the ten years has also contributed to the building of trust.
3. A long-term partnership with FONADH, a national organisation that is well established locally and composed of active and committed members who know the areas of action and the communities. *"When a trail is made, if it is not used, it fades away"*, as the chief of the Moorish village of Mourtogal and Rotiet pays tribute to the work of the FONADH field team, which allows the "trail" opened by Concordis to be maintained.
4. Local mediators, themselves village members of the communities, appointed by their peers to represent them and then trained by Concordis, from both sides of the conflict, working together, mediating collaboratively, modelling social cohesion themselves as they work side by side. Sometimes these are people who already have an important social role, such as the village chief or the imam.
5. A strategy of small steps: individual interviews, followed by focus groups, then collective dialogues, which constitute a thoughtful and progressive sequencing of action, also made possible by the duration of the programme.
6. Conflict resolution actions are accompanied by inclusive development support measures. This makes it possible both to respond to pressing economic development needs identified by the communities as a whole and to encourage people to make a lasting commitment to social cohesion, since these projects can only work if there is inter-community understanding.
7. A process controlled and nurtured by the communities themselves: during the dialogue sessions it is the participants who identify the needs they wish to address together. The idea of making a market garden available to women was put forward spontaneously and collectively by these formerly rival communities.
8. Training is offered to women (in land tenure, mediation, leadership, negotiation, etc.) and to men. The women noted that thanks to these sessions they are more aware of their rights, and they are given some of the skills needed to assert these rights. Some of the training sessions have brought together people from different regions, allowing them to meet each other and learn from each other's situations. Mahmoud, from Keur Madiké, found it very inspiring to solve the problems of the village.
9. The authorities are consulted and involved at every stage of the project, at national and local level. They are asked to take over to meet the development needs expressed by the populations

where this is no longer the role of the project and in the long term. This is the case, for example, of the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, Humanitarian Action and Relations with Civil Society, which has committed its development aid to complement the work of Concordis. This contributes to the sustainability of social cohesion and the strengthening of relations between the population and the authorities.

10. Advocacy with national and local authorities and other international organisations to complement Concordis' development work in these areas. Thus, other actors have intervened to support the initiative: international NGOs but also the State which, reassured by the existing social cohesion, has financed equipment for the cultivation of the now collective land. In fact, in the market gardens, the women only need a small initial investment to start the seeds, which are often purchased at their own expense, in addition to the heavy work of cultivating virgin land, which they do for the time being without agricultural machinery. By accurately mapping these needs in 2018 and updating them in 2023, Concordis is helping to advocate for this external support.

Looking forward, there is still much to be done in Mauritania. In the past, the main struggle was the conflict between these different groups. That conflict is largely resolved, but there remain enormous challenges for these communities. Many of those living in the Senegal River valley remain very poor, with high levels of illiteracy. Their livelihoods are dependent of subsistence farming, which is increasingly marginal given the effects of climate change.

The need for peacebuilding work is largely over, but there remain huge needs for international development assistance. In the past this was more difficult, given the sensitive conflict dynamics, but the door is now open for developmental support that can benefit the various populations equally.

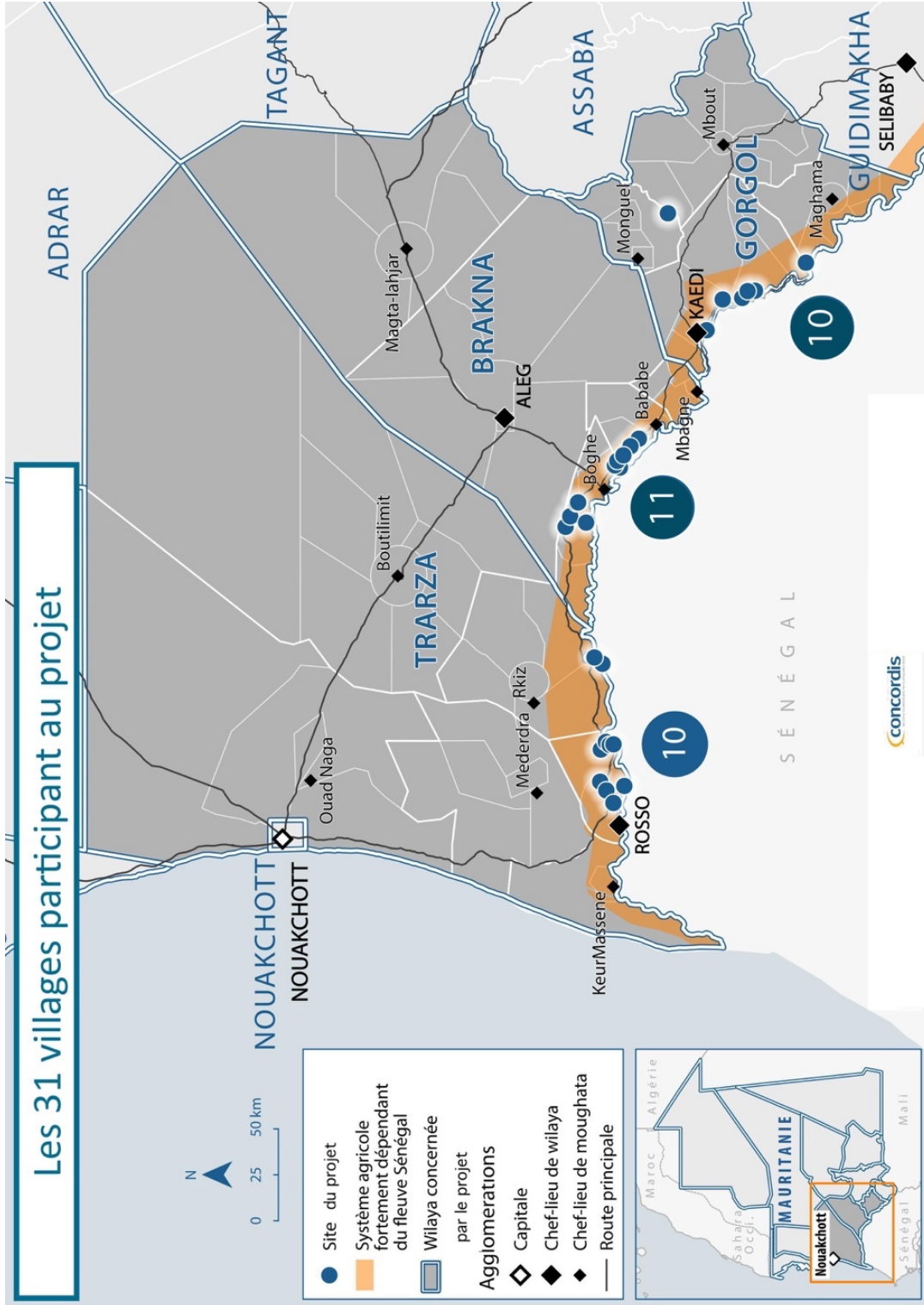
The people of the Senegal River valley have shown a remarkable and growing resilience. Despite a harsh physical environment and a very difficult history, which could have easily led to armed conflict, the various communities and groups in southern Mauritania have succeeded in transforming themselves.

Civil society is in its infancy but flourishing, gender relations are evolving rapidly, as is the case with relationships and even marriages between people from different communities are normalised.

But Mauritania still has great development needs, and its people are on the front line of the effects of climate change. We need to address these needs to improve their socio-economic condition, tackle poverty, and maintain social cohesion.

**We therefore call on those in power to support and back the needs and priorities expressed by communities highlighted in the reports published here:**

**[www.concordis.international/mauritania](http://www.concordis.international/mauritania)**





Concordis works alongside those involved in or affected by armed conflict, helping them find workable solutions that address the root causes of conflict and contribute to lasting peace and economic development. We're committed to finding solutions that benefit women as well as men, those in armed groups as well as those who choose not to take up arms, national governments as well as civil society.

Learn more on our website: <https://concordis.international/>

