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The Colonial origins of Institutions in Mauritania

Abstract

This paper examines and evaluates the state of development in Mauritania, a former French colony in West Africa. The drivers of (under)development that the paper focuses on are institutions. By focusing on institutions as the main factors that determine the development process of the country, I also focus on the colonial origins of institutions. Hence, in this paper, I draw on Acemoglu and colleagues' argument on the origin of colonial origins of institutions as they identify two types of colonial institutions—Inclusive and Exclusive (Acemoglu et.al.2001). However, in this research I argue that there is a third type of institution the “status quo institution”. This is a situation where the colonizer does not engage in any significant institution building but rely on the existing form of systems in the colony. I use the case of Mauritania a former France colony to illustrate the existence of the third type of colonial institutions.

Introduction

The term Institution is a broad term that could have a wide range of definitions. One of the common definitions of institutions as “formal and informal rules that organize social, political and economic relations” (North, 1990). Institutions have certain common features such as that they are reproduced through continuing interaction. they produce a certain level of predictability and certainty that facilitate these social interactions. They tend to persist over time and change slowly. In the domain of development analyses, many of the literature highlights the importance of institutions for economic development and social wellbeing. Dani Rodrik and his colleagues in their article “*I (Dani Rodrik et.al, 2004)institutions rule: the primacy of institutions over geography and integration in economic development.*” find that the impact of in defining the income level of a country trumps the effect of any other factors including geography and integration of economy (Rodrik et al, 2004).

On the other hand, Acemoglu and colleagues trace back the impact of institutions on development to their colonial origins. (Acemoglu et all. 2001). They argue that different types of

colonial policies created different sets of institutions across colonies. The significance of these different colonial policies and the institutions that come out of them is the impact of that on the institutions on the colonized countries that last even after the independence. According to Acemoglu and his colleagues a continent link Africa “is poorer than the rest of the world not because of pure geographic or cultural factors, but because of worse institutions’. (Acemoglu et al. 2001).

Country Profile

Mauritania is considered a lower-middle-income country, it has an HDI value of 0.527 which put it in the low human development category ranking 161 out of 189 countries.

The country covers a large area of just over 1 million km² in the North-West of Africa. 90 percent of this land is desert with 0.5 percent of the land in Mauritania is arable. It is the fourth least densely populated country in Africa with a density of 3.9 inhabitants per km² and a total population of 4.4 million. Geographically and culturally Mauritania links the Arab Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa. This unique geopolitical position of the country is reflected in its ethnic and cultural composition. The population of Mauritania is composed of two main ethnic communities that are also divided into sub-groups. The two main communities are the *Bidhan* (Arabs) and the Black Africans. This population has been historically nomadic. Transhumance and semi-nomadic livestock-raising dominate rural life, with productive irrigated agriculture concentrated in a narrow belt along the Senegal River. Alongside the natural resource wealth of iron ore, gold, crude oil, and natural gas which has boosted the gross domestic product of the country within the last couple of decades.

Social and Historical Context

Today’s country of Mauritania has historically been known by many names. The many names of the country reflect the various ethnicities, peoples, and political and tribal powers that have inhabited and controlled the territory. It was known as the ‘Desert of the Masked’ this name was attributed to the clothing that was worn by the ‘Sanhijites’ who were Barber tribes that inhabited the land. The ‘Land of Al-mghafra’ was another name of Mauritania in the 12-13th century. The name goes back to the ventricles of Beni-Hassan who were Arab tribes that were displaced to Mauritania within Arab migration waves that entered the country between the 11th and 12th

centuries ((Abbas,2015). Known also as *Chinguetti* the name of a city in the north of Mauritania, which was the main stop for the commercial caravans through the desert. Another main is the 'Land of Bidhan'. The country came to be known as Mauritania in the late 19th. The name was given to the country by the European explorers. Even though there are many interpretations of the meaning of the name 'Mauritania' many argue that it came from the name 'Maurs' or 'Moor' which is a name that the European used to refer to the people of North Africa(ibid).

The various names that the territory of Mauritania has been historically known to reflect the long history of human inhabitation of the territory and the rich interaction between various ethnic groups and cultures. This ethnic diversity is reflected in the Modern Mauritanian society that is composed of two main ethnic communities: *Bidhan* and Black African.

1-Black Africans : The black Africans comprise four ethnic groups that are closely related to each other and to black African ethnicities in West Africa as well. **Fulani** is the largest group within the black African community in Mauritania. They are called by different names such as Fulbe, Fulata, Fulah, Fulani, and Haal-pulaar. Second group is **Soninke** they are one of the oldest groups that inhabited territory of Mauritania. They were the founders of the Kingdom of Ghana in south eastern Mauritania in the early 5th century. They are now mainly concentrated in regions in the south east of the country. The third group is **Wolof**, they are mainly concentrated in Trarza and on the south western border with Senegal. Finally, **Bambara** fourth and is the smallest black African group in Mauritania. They live in few thousands in areas in the east in Nema, Aioeun and Kankosa. These ethnic groups were more extended to the north where they were spread in the region of Adrar and Trarza. However, the continuous move in of Berber and Arabs tribes to the south led to further displacement of African communities to the southern regions of the country; where the vast majority of them settled in the area by the valley of the Senegal River, Kaedi, and in Guidimaka. They follow the religion of Islam and speak Wolof, Soninke, Polar, Bambara, and French is a common language that the different Negro groups use, as well as most of the Arabs. Most of these groups were originally displaced from Niger, Senegal, and Mali.

2 Bidhan : the word '*Bidhan*' is an Arabic word that means 'white'. The Bidhan ethnicity compose ethnic Arabs and Arabophone groups. The presence of the Arabs in Mauritania and in North African as well, was associated with the great migrations of the Beni Halal and Beni Salim tribes during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. These tribes had originally lived the Arabian Peninsula, then in Egypt and from there to the rest of North Africa. The Arab migration to Mauritania come mainly from Morocco with the tribes of 'Maaqil' who fled from the persecution of the Marinid state of Fez (in today's Morocco). They moved southward to Western Sahara and northern Mauritania in search of freedom and better livelihood. Most of the current Mauritania Arabs belong to Beni Hassan who are descendent of the Beni-Hellal tribes (Abbas, 2015).

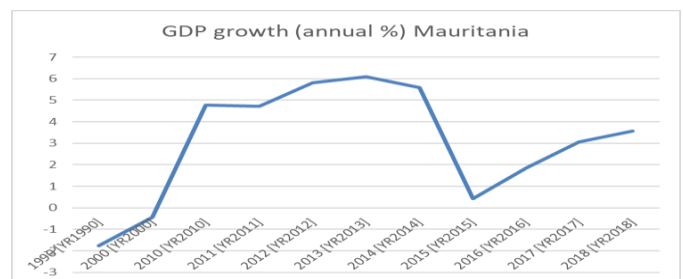
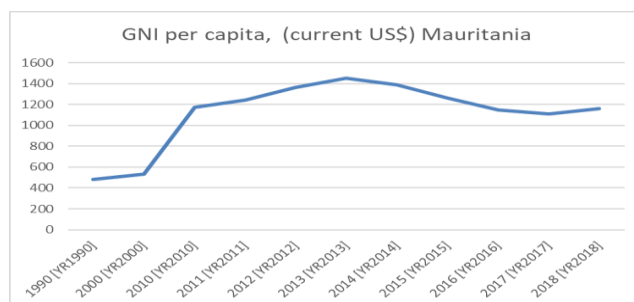
Colonization

The strategic position of Mauritania as a connecting point between the Northern and western regions of Africa was significant for the European colonial powers. Thus, Mauritania became the object of interest for many colonial powers who compete over control of the region. In 1854 France made a big step towards seizing the Mauritanian territory for itself when France launched a military campaign against the Arab tribes in the *Emirate* of Trarza, which was the most powerful *Emirate* that fought against the Western colonial presence in Mauritania (Adam, 2015). In 1899, a French government decision was issued to establish a "French Mauritanian state". Then, at the Green Island Conference held in 1906 with the participation of the European countries competing for Mauritania such as France, Britain, and Spain. They decided that the North and West African regions be under French control. French began to enter Mauritania as a colonial power at the beginning of the twentieth century, and they faced strong resistance from the people of Mauritania in a continuous series of battles. After more than half a century of exploitive colonization, Mauritania obtained its independence on November 28, 1960.

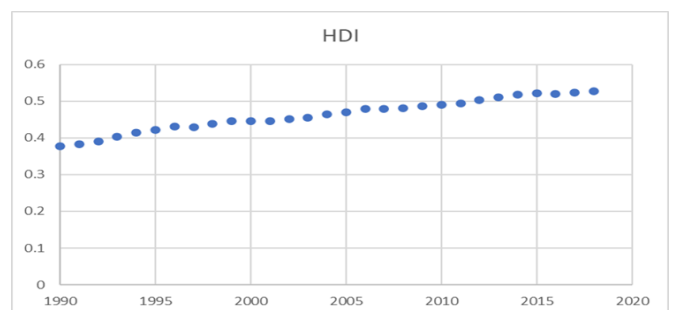
State of development in Mauritania

Mauritania is considered as a lower-middle-income country. It has a GNI per capita of 1.160 US as of the year of 2018 and a GDP annual growth of 3.6 as of the same year according to the World Bank world development indicators data. Its human development score is 0.527, and it ranks low at 161 out of 182 countries according the UN HDI 2020.

Mauritania is rich with natural resources endowment. Mauritania is a world supplier of iron ore, crude oil, copper, and gold. It is the 2d-ranked exporter and producer of iron ore in Africa, and it was the world's 11th- and 15th-ranked exporter and producer of iron ore, in 2013-15 respectively. In addition to copper, gold, and iron ore, Mauritania produced modest quantities of cement, crude oil, gypsum, quartz, salt (USGS, 2016). Additionally, the country has abundant fisheries resources, and its inshore waters are the cradle of an intense biological activity. These fisheries resources are exploited with increasing intensity, especially as regard high value species. Recent estimates report a fisheries potential of about 1 1 500 000 tons per annum, most of which composed of pelagic species. High value species consist in particular of cephalopods, crustaceans and various species of demersal fishes. These species represent about 20 percent of total catch.



These graphs while showing the economic and human development progress in the countries they reveal a pattern of inconsistency in this progress.



The unsteady growth in this country, the sharp ups and downs in its annual GDP growth , and the rather slow increase in its human development index are product of relatively weak and unstable political and economic institutions combined with relatively fragile social structure.

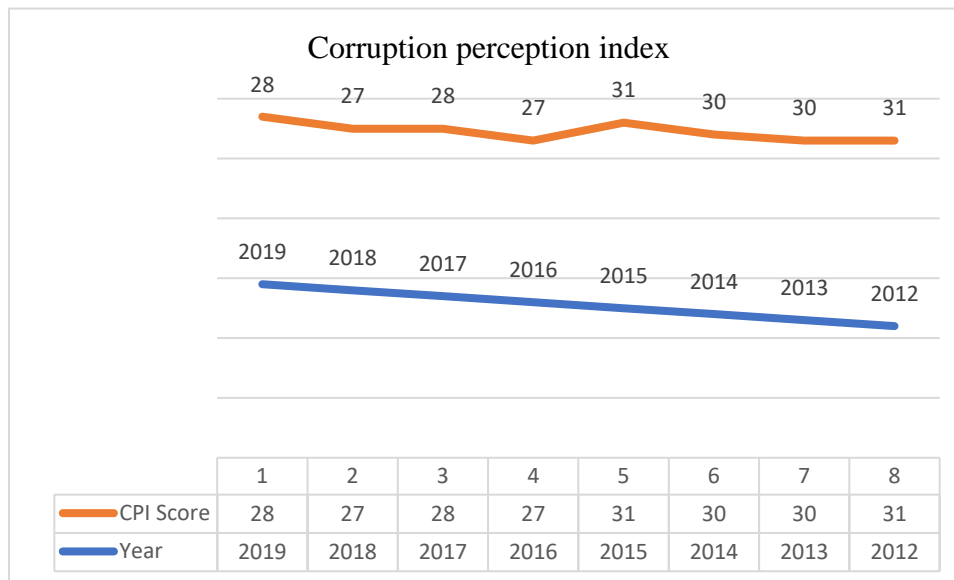
Institutions and (under)development in Mauritania

Political Institutions

The path of establishing stable regimes, good political institutions, and peaceful rotation of power in Mauritania has suffered under the prevailing culture of coups d'état and military rule. The only president with no military background that the country ever had was elected in the first democratic election in the country in 2008. Since its independence, Mauritania has gone through a series of coup d'état and military ceasing of power. The first Mauritanian President Moktar Ould Daddah was thrown in a military coup in 1978 after a failure in the Western Sahara War 1975-1978. He was overthrown by Mustafa Ould Salek in a coup that was the first in a sequential series of coups. Less than a year later in 1979–April 6th Ahmad Ould Bouceif and Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah overthrew Mustafa Ould Salek, and then Ould Louly hold the power but no longer than his predecessor Ould Salek before Ould Haidallah's second coup in January 1980. Maaouya, who led a successful coup d'état against Ould Haidallah in 1984, was the longest president to stay in power (from 1984 to 2005). However, he was not immune to the law for military overthrowing power, thus, in 2005 the military general Ely Ould Mohamed Vall was able to take over the power. In 2007 for the first time in the country's history, a civilian president who had no military background was elected in a democratic election. But old habits die hard, in August 2008 the elected president faced the same fate as his predecessors, General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz overthrew Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, (Chukwudig, 2013).

The military institution's control of the Mauritanian political system has resulted in weakening state institutions, undermining the system of good governance, and creating a system of corruption. In this system the power is concentrated in the hands of the few, corruption and lack of transparency continue to have negative consequences on the economic and social development of the country. According to the World Bank *country partnership* report in 2018 Patronage in the

public administration distorts incentive structures and skews public resource allocation and service delivery (World Bank, 2018)



In 2013 IMF country report stated that the Mauritanian economy was hampered by a “rent economy, concentrated on very few sectors that are easily captured by a very small political and economic elite.” Noting that “because oligopolistic local conglomerates dominate the mining industry, it is common for contracts and licenses to be awarded to the relatives and associates of local politicians.” interfering with an efficient allocation of resources, limiting productivity and employment growth. In addition to creating this unstable political situation, the military rule has encouraged the presence of tribal leaders to control society by turning the public attention away from politics to tribal and ethnic confrontations.

Economic structures

Weak physical and human capital, Although Mauritania is a resource-rich country its capacity to benefit from its natural endowment. Among the major problems that hinder the utilization of its resources, especially mining and fishing is the weak infrastructure and lack of technologies to produce. As a result, most of the extracted minerals, as well as fish, are shipped and manufactured abroad. The lack of human capital and physical capital makes the country unable

to benefit from its natural resources. Creating great dependency and vulnerability to the foreign market and foreign business exploitation (IMF, 2012). The fishing industry in Mauritania is a great example of wasted wealth. Where because of its lack of capacity to produce or manufacture this wealth Mauritanian fishery has been overwhelmed by foreign over-exploitation. Despite that its coastline is one of the richest in the world fishing still does not make up more than 27 percent of the country's GDP.

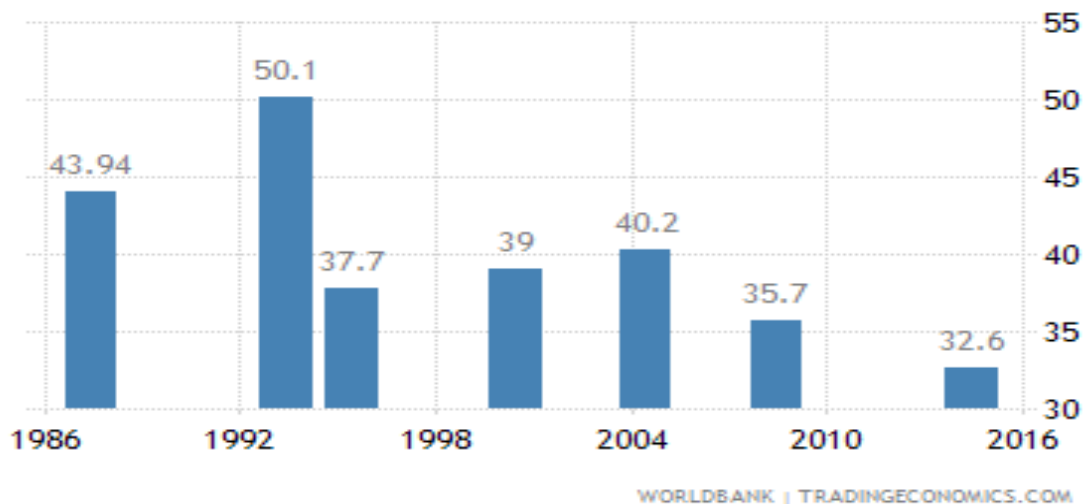
Economic dependency Like many other small open economies Mauritania is highly vulnerable to global shocks. But because of geographical, economic, and historical ties, the Mauritanian economy is particularly dependent on developments in Europe. This dependency and interconnectedness with Europe have been increasing over the years, particularly, through trade and exporting. Europe is the main importer of Mauritanian exports. According to the IMF country report in 2012, the vulnerability of Mauritania's economy to a shock from Europe is higher than in the average low-income country. The same report noted that between 2000-10 *trade* exports from Mauritania to Europe more than doubled only to represent more than 30 percent of the country

GDP in 2012, the highest among low-income countries. Of all goods exported to Europe mining (iron ore, gold, and copper) accounted for about 74 percent while fishing products accounted for 23 percent. As a result, Mauritania has a huge problem in export diversification while its economy is highly dependent on developments in extractive industries.

Moreover, Mauritanian dependency on Europe extends to significant *aid and remittance flow*. Mauritania is considered an aid-dependent country. Aid averages 13 percent of the country's GDP, mostly from multilateral institutions. Yet 80 percent of the bilateral aid flows come from Europe, representing about 5 percent of GDP. This makes the country vulnerable to cut in the flow of official development assistance.

Social Structures

Social Inequality is a major obstacle to poverty reduction and social well-being policies. The lack of effective accountability and transparency institutions. The prevalence of sectarianism and patronage has led to great social inequality within the Mauritanian society. Mauritania ranks very low on the GINI coefficient with very high inequality.



The growth that the country has reached in the last few years was not inclusive because it did not benefit the poor. The 2006 oil discovery that fueled a sharp increase in public spending greatly benefited the middle class increasing their per capita real consumption by 3.4 percent annually, while the poorest 20 percent witnessed a 0.5 percent decline in real consumption (UN country profile, 2019). Poverty rates are disproportionate across regions. In 2008 while the national poverty rate stood at 40 percent across regional rates showed a different pattern. In big urban areas such as the capital city Nouakchott, Nouadhibou city poverty reaches a rate about 15 to 20 percent while in other regions especially rural areas the percentile stood at 60 % (IMF, 2012)

Colonial Origins of institutions in Mauritania

The political and economic institutions in the modern state of Mauritania are inherited from the colonial era. While the basics of the social, cultural, and economic structures precede the French presence these structures were only to persist and transfer to the modern state through colonization.

The colonial experience in Mauritania is rather unique and different from most other colonial cases. The uniqueness of the Mauritanian experience lies in the fact that the country was not initially colonized for its resources or economic interests, instead its value lies in its geopolitical position as a transiting belt that connected the French colonies in north and west Africa. This particular fact is important in understanding the kind of colonist strategy that would be adapted in the country. With this particular goal in mind of securing the road between French colonies in the northern and western regions of Africa, the French colonial has no incentive to invest in institutions or infrastructure only to the extent that it will keep the vast desert under minimum control to guarantee a safe road. The colonial strategy in Mauritania was dependent on maintaining the status quo while finding ways to exploit it.

When the colonials came to Mauritania it was a wide desert inhabited by groups of Arab tribes, Barber, and Black African groups under tribal social and political structures. When Mauritania became independent in 1960 it was almost the same wide desert inhabited by Arab -Barbar tribes and black African groups in a tribal system with no traces of modern infrastructure, political governance, or economic modernization. Part of the explanation of lack of any investment in Mauritania by the French colonization is first the complexity ethics structure of the Mauritian society containing different ethnicities, languages, structures, second is the low economic interest of the country since it did not have significant natural resources at the time. Hence, the effort to try to establish any inclusive political or social institutions in the country was largely expensive and unnecessary for colonial purposes.

The Origins of the Social Institutions

The colonial status quo social institutions were reinforcement of the social hierarchy and racial class division in the traditional Mauritanian society. The colonialist did not seek to systematically transfer or change the political and social organization of the different communities in the Mauritanian society but rather they sought to maintain those divisions and exploit them to help them consolidate their power over the people (Mariella, 2006). At the time of the French conquest, the Mauritanian society was structured in a very complex social and economic class hierarchy system. This social hierarchy does not necessarily stem from ethnic and racial roots but rather on economic and profession status. It is based on the traditional tribal distribution of political and economic power. This social classification is applied in both main ethnic communities (Bidhan and Black African). In the Bidhan community, at the top of the social pyramid of the hierarchy are the Arab *Hassan* tribes, traditionally warriors descended from the ranks of the Maqil Arabs whose first inroads into Mauritania date to the thirteenth century. Hassan tribes enjoy their position at the top because of their occupation as warriors. As warriors, they took hold of the most important dimension in any society that is 'security' they were the defenders of the people and they had the military power. Their military power also generated economic power and political power (Anthony, 1999).

In the second ranking below *Hassan* are the *zawaya* (marabouts, or the religious caste). *Zawaya* whose classification is also related to their profession, leading lives of religious study, teaching, and propagation. A third social class is called *Lehma*. They are groups who have no military power or scholarly prestige. They include the majority of the society with different occupational castes such as Artisans, Shepherds, Musicians, and *Haratin* who are former slaves. All these even though do not enjoy the same political or economic influence, they form the same community '*Bidhan*' they share the same ethnic origins: Arabs or mixed Arab- Barber and speak the same language *Hassaniya* (a dialect of Arabic). Except for the *Haratin* who are *Bidhan* from black African descent, however, they have been linguistically and culturally assimilated to the *Bidhan* community. The same social hierarchy existed in the Black African community: Fulanis, Soninkes, Bambara, and Wolofs. The African community is socially divided into the same occupational castes as the Bidhan community (ibid). This political and social classification from the 14th century resist the colonial era and persist in the modern state system.

Occupied mainly by securing the trade roads from the west to the north, the French sought to keep the Mauritanian Sahara stable and under control. The strategy to stabilize the desert was to maintain the status quo and strengthen the power of the traditional authorities who allied with the French. Slavery was a part of the social organization of the Mauritanian society at the time of the French conquest. However, the colonial administration agreed that because slavery was so deeply rooted in the social building of these groups "Mauritania was not yet "ripe enough for the exercise of full individualism" or the "progressive and definitive freeing of the laboring masses"(McDougall, 2005). Because slavery was an integral part of the social and economic life of the Mauritanian society. The French permitted access to slaves for Mauritania elites but prohibited external trade with slaves(ibid).

Origins of Political institution:

Tribalism and detachment from centralized authority were the main characteristics of the Mauritanian society before the colonial era. In the traditional Mauritanian society, the most powerful form of political entity was the '*emirate*' especially among the Bidhan the majority of the population at the time. The *Emirate* consists of a leader (or emir) from the warriors, assembly of tribes' leaders, and the rest of the people. Upon the French colonization clashes between *Emirates* and the French end in favor of the latter. Eventually, the Emirates that resist colonization were defeated and either divided into smaller tribe entities or the French appointed some allied leaders (Maimone (2013). While the *emirate* system was not overthrown by colonization the French instead chose to manipulate and reconstitute this system to fuse their power(ibid). They strengthened and boosted their relations with the emirs, indigenous chieftains and created a system in which *emirs* and chiefs became intermediaries between the colonial administration and the people(ibid)

An important part of the collaboration with the *emirs* was that they became tax collectors for the French as the major sources of the colonial administration revenue were derived from taxes extracted from the indigenous population (Bennoune,1978). In 1913 alone, taxes from the colonized population reached about 136,840 Franc. The people in Mauritania were forced to pay a head tax amounting to four Franc per head on every person the age of ten and above. Additionally, they had to pay the Muslim taxes to the colonial administration comprising the *Zakat*, one-fortieth of their flocks or herds, and the *Ushur*, one-tenth of their crops. (ibid)

Recommendations

Despite the political social and economic challenges, the country still faces, Mauritania has made significant steps toward more development considering where it started from. A snapshot of the situation in the county just a couple of years before it gained its independence illustrates that. In 1955 out of approximately 600,000 economically active persons, some 400,000 were engaged in livestock production, 160,000 in agriculture, and the remaining 40,000 in other activities, such as trade and handicrafts and wage labor (Seddon, 1996). As late as 1955, only two major towns had electricity, to service some 2,000 European employees of the colonial service and MIFERMA (the multinational mining company Mines de Fer de Mauritanie). There were no paved roads or railways. Only about 7 percent of school-age children attended classes in 1957 (ibid). However, since its independence, precisely in the last two to three decades, Mauritania has made major progress in poverty reduction, life expectancy, Urbanization, and education. However, a lot still to be done.

year	Life expectancy	Urban population	Mortality rate, under-5	GDP (current US\$)
1960	44.432	6.88	253	92609243.69
1965	47.868	10.09	220.4	172767212.4
1970	50.404	14.564	192.7	209348256
1975	52.358	20.569	186.6	475916497.7
1980	54.913	27.371	164.5	709041462.2
1985	57.735	34.994	139	683193876.9
1990	59.688	39.323	116.9	1019600785
1995	60.426	38.705	113.5	1415296706
2000	60.706	38.091	113.5	1293654177
2005	61.349	42.111	109.7	2184447591
2010	62.527	46.588	97.1	4337794153
2015	63.936	51.089	83.5	4828858025
2016	64.208	51.962	80.7	4679346591
2017	64.464	52.824	78.2	4905893855
2018	64.704	53.672	75.7	5234817927

The future policies of Mauritania should focus more on building the country's human and physical capacity. The focus on education should be a priority since Mauritania still lags in access to education. Moreover, investment in developing its fisheries and livestock resources is necessary because these are valuable yet under-exploited resources that have great potential to help lessen the country's dependency on extracted commodities. Furthermore, social inequality, lack of equity, and lack of transparency are all problem that hinders the progress and overall development and good life for everyone

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(Bouganour, 2017)