



# SAHRAWI LIVELIHOODS IN ALGERIA

Building self-sufficiency

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Over 40 years ago, Oxfam began working with Sahrawi refugees living in extremely harsh conditions in camps in the Saharan desert of western Algeria, who had fled their homes as a result of ongoing disputes over territory in Western Sahara. Since then, the Sahrawi refugees have been largely dependent on humanitarian aid from a number of agencies, but increasing needs and an uncertain funding future have meant that the agencies are having to adapt their programme approaches. Oxfam has met these new challenges by combining the existing aid with new resilience-building activities, supporting the community to lead self-sufficient and fulfilling lives in the arid desert environment.

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Cover photo: A Sahrawi refugee holding germinated barley that will produce hydroponic fodder for her goats, supported by the Oxfam hydroponics project in the Sahrawi refugee camps. Tineke D'haese/Oxfam.

# 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Refugees from Western Sahara have been living in camps in the Tindouf province of Algeria since 1976 due to an ongoing dispute over the control of the Western Sahara territory. The conflict forced the Sahrawi people, who traditionally had a nomadic lifestyle, to settle in arid and isolated conditions where opportunities for self-sustenance are almost non-existent. With no imminent political solution to this protracted crisis in sight, the refugee population is largely dependent on external humanitarian aid for its survival.

There are five refugee camps in the south-east of Algeria. At the time of writing the total population of these camps was 175,000. Over the years, the Sahrawi crisis has progressively evolved from the stage of 'urgent' humanitarian crisis to a 'protracted' humanitarian situation. Today, even the refugees' most basic needs are not being met in terms of nutrition, education, WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) and health. Food assistance accounts for 52% of the refugees' food consumption, and the poorest households spend over 60% of their meagre incomes on food.<sup>1</sup> The limited range of food available – which is mainly composed of cereals, sugar and oil but is lacking in protein – means the community is highly vulnerable to malnutrition.

The situation in the camps is also characterized by an extreme shortage of economic opportunities, particularly among women and young people. This is the result of a range of factors including political instability, geographical isolation, hostile climate, poor infrastructure, limited government efforts to implement market-oriented policies/actions, and the restricted socio-economic position of women in Sahrawi society. There has also been a significant decrease in available humanitarian funding, partly due to the limited visibility and traction of the crisis and partly due to major emergencies overseas taking precedence.

Oxfam has been working in the Sahrawi camps for over 40 years, with a strong focus on food distribution. However, the situation has become increasingly demanding in recent years due to the growing density of the population and funding levels dropping significantly.<sup>2</sup> Oxfam has had to innovate and combine longer-term approaches with short-term solutions, incorporating both humanitarian assistance and sustainable development within its programme work.

## 2 OXFAM'S PROGRAMME

Oxfam has worked for years to meet the humanitarian needs of the Sahrawi refugees, and in more recent years to strengthen their resilience while protecting them from food insecurity. It has steadily developed livelihood opportunities and local agriculture initiatives to complement the humanitarian assistance that most of the refugees still need.

Until recently, Oxfam had been distributing 2–3kg of fresh food (potatoes, onions, carrots, beetroots, cucumbers, apples and oranges) per person per month. As of 2018, food is only being distributed during the months where it is the scarcest (July–October). A food supply centre with eight cold rooms ensures that the food is stored in the best conditions. The World Food Programme also provides a basket of dried food for each household that meets the minimum calorie intake, but a diverse diet is essential for good nutrition and in maintaining the dignity of the refugees. Alongside distribution of fresh food, Oxfam has been working on the following projects.

## SUPPORTING BUSINESS CREATION AND LIVELIHOODS

The severe lack of income-generating opportunities in the camps is frustrating for young people and can increase the risk of violence.<sup>3</sup> Alongside UNHCR, Oxfam has been supporting business creation and development, particularly among young men in the community. This intervention is new to the area, so business capacities are low. Oxfam granted 23 small projects, each consisting of four people, \$9,000 to help create several small businesses. The results were evaluated at the end of the two-year project period. Businesses included restoration, agriculture, trade, health and education services.



Sign advertising a local bakery, one of the businesses set up with support from Oxfam and UNHCR. Photo: Brenda Pennell/Oxfam.

## STRENGTHENING LOCAL PRODUCTION

In the past, Oxfam has supported the regional public farms managed by the Algerian Ministry of Economic Development. These large-scale farms have salaried workers, and the harvest is distributed for free in the various camps. However, a lack of long-term plot management and dependence on external aid for salary payment makes this system unsustainable. With funding from the

Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), Oxfam is supporting small-scale family farming by distributing regional garden plots among selected refugee families, enabling them to produce fresh food both for their own consumption and to sell.

## HYDROPONICS SYSTEM

Since early 2017, Oxfam has been working with the World Food Programme's innovation accelerator unit to develop hydroponic – i.e. soil free – production systems to grow barley fodder for sheep and goats. 170 selected households, with the support of Oxfam practitioners, have had access to production units where they germinate and irrigate barley seeds until they transform into a carpet of grass suitable for feed. This system allows the daily production of fresh fodder throughout the year, despite the arid conditions.



Hydroponic unit next to a vegetable garden (the garden is reusing the irrigation water from the hydroponic project). Photo: Tineke D'haese/Oxfam.

## 3 WHAT DID WE LEARN?

### WHAT WORKED WELL

#### **Continuation of food distribution despite challenges**

Despite the lower overall funding available, Oxfam has managed to maintain the distribution of fresh food in the camps, albeit in lower quantities and for shorter periods. Oxfam has worked closely with the Sahrawi Red Crescent and the Spanish Red Cross to ensure the distribution of a variety of fresh produce.

Oxfam has also been successful in securing a large supply centre to safely store fresh food, fully financed by ECHO, the EU's humanitarian aid agency. While food distribution has decreased by 40% over the last three years, the complementary resilience strategies described above are expected to help families meet their food needs over the coming years.

## **Good feedback on the hydroponics system**

The hydroponics system has enabled production of 10–40kg of biomass per day per household, which feeds between five and 20 animals. The impact study is underway, but the results are expected to show that improvement in the quality of food for livestock in turn improves animal health and the quality of milk produced, thereby increasing the food and income security of livestock owners. This has generated positive feedback among livestock owners. As a participant based in the camp in Smara reported:

*'My family has also become involved and we've learned a lot. In fact, working on this project has become one of our priorities: it enables us to feed our goats with healthy, low-cost food, meaning that they produce milk every day with excellent yields.'*

Another participant in the same region stated that 'the project was very important for [her]' and explained in her feedback that she had improved her situation even further 'by making the most of the leftover water to grow other products like carrots and beetroots'. Active female participation has been encouraged, which has empowered women to become the economic decision makers in their households.

## **Wider awareness raising on hydroponics**

Oxfam initiated training and support to ensure that awareness on hydroponics was not restricted to just the selected households. In total, 1,100 people took part in these awareness activities, helping to ensure wider adoption of the system among livestock owners. Feedback has also shown that some participants have been sharing their skills and encouraging their neighbours to get involved.

## **WHAT DID NOT WORK WELL**

### **Business capacities remain limited**

The project to finance the creation of small businesses faced several challenges, including tensions with authorities regarding methods of payment. As noted above, participants' business capacities and entrepreneurship skills were low at the outset. The final evaluation of the project reported continued poor comprehension of business and financial skills among participants, and inadequate HR support. Many of the small businesses were poorly maintained and funding was unappropriated. However, the lessons learned will be of great benefit to future work. A planned youth and livelihood project will incorporate much closer monitoring and will be strengthened by an 'entrepreneurship ecosystem' with a greater emphasis on coaching and economic strategy.

## 4 CONCLUSION

Oxfam will continue to support business creation and development with the support of Sida and the European External Action Service (EEAS), with an additional component on strengthening gender justice in both the economic and social aspects of the programme. Fresh produce will continue to be distributed, and Oxfam will purchase some of the local produce that has been grown by the community – encouraging local production and providing food for all in a sustainable way. For the near future, food distributions will continue to occur only during the most problematic months in terms of hunger (July–October), with the aim that members of the community will be self-sufficient for the rest of the year. Eventually, it is anticipated that food distributions will no longer need to take place.

Although there have been challenges and there will need to be more work and research into improving economic opportunities for women and young people, the programmes have shown encouraging progress in community resilience. Small-scale farming and hydroponics have complemented each other, with the garden plots benefitting from the irrigation water waste. These practices will complement the continuing food distribution with sales of income-generating produce, encouraging entrepreneurship within the community. It is essential to engage members of the community in strengthening their skills and capacities, so they can move away from their role as recipients of humanitarian aid towards becoming active and self-sufficient people in control of their own development.

## NOTES

1 World Food Program. (2017). *Assistance to Refugees from Western Sahara*. <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000069857/download/>

2 Oxfam. (2015). *40 Years of Exile*. [https://d1tn3vj7xz9fdh.cloudfront.net/s3fs-public/file\\_attachments/bp-40-years-exile-western-sahrawi-refugees-280415-en.pdf](https://d1tn3vj7xz9fdh.cloudfront.net/s3fs-public/file_attachments/bp-40-years-exile-western-sahrawi-refugees-280415-en.pdf)

3 World Health Organisation. (2014). *Global status report on violence prevention*. [http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/status\\_report/2014/report/report/en/](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/status_report/2014/report/report/en/)

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