



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Mauritania at 60

Dietz, A.J.; Ehrhardt, D.W.L.; Veldkamp, F.

Citation

Dietz, A. J., Ehrhardt, D. W. L., & Veldkamp, F. (2020). Mauritania at 60. *Ascl Infosheet*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/138463>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/138463>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



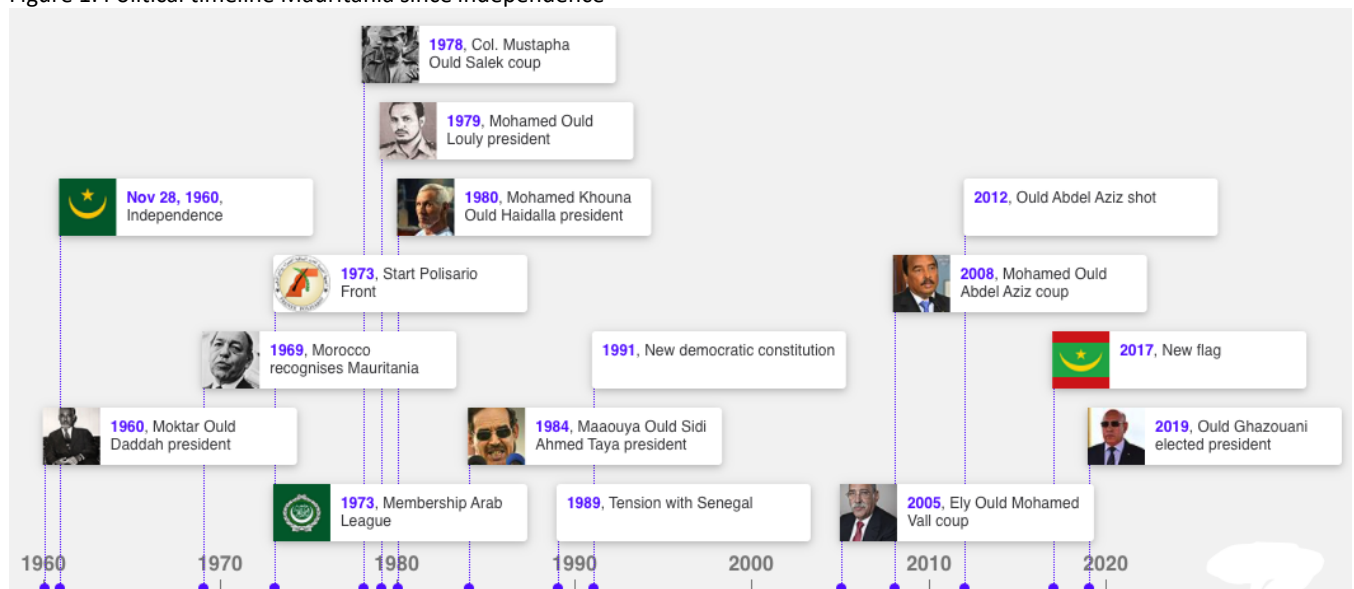
Mauritania at 60

Political history

1960 was the 'Year of Africa': many former colonies in Africa became politically independent. Of the seventeen colonies gaining independence in that year, Mauritania

was the seventeenth and last one: on November 28. Mauritania had been a French protectorate and later a colony from 1920 onwards, as part of French West Africa (see Figure 1 for a political timeline).

Figure 1: Political timeline Mauritania since independence



Source: Encyclopedia Britannica

Since independence in 1960, Mauritania has known few democratically elected regimes. Moktar Ould Daddah, elected president in 1958, ruled without elections until a military coup in 1978. Under Ould Daddah's leadership, Mauritania navigated the early years of independence under a cloud of tension with its northern neighbour, Morocco, and overtures to both the Organisation of African Unity (later AU) and the Arab League. Ould Daddah also faced difficulties around the Western Sahara and the Polisario Front guerrillas in Mauritania's part of that region. The 1978 coup was led by Ould Daddah's chief of staff, Mustapha Ould Salek, who would quickly hand over power to Mohamed Ould Louly. He brought peace with the Polisario Front, but increased tensions with Morocco, and was in turn replaced in early 1980 by the then-prime minister, Mohamed Ould Haidalla.

It was only under Maaouya Ould Sidi Ahmed Taya that Mauritania's regime would stabilise again, since he held the presidency from 1984 until 2005. Ahmed Taya faced

continuing tensions with Morocco, and newly escalating conflict on Mauritania's Senegalese border. He became known for bringing back democracy, most notably with the new 1991 constitution, extensive structural adjustment of the economy, and attempts to implement Arabisation of the public services. After the introduction of electoral democracy, Ahmed Taya continued to win elections and hold onto power, until a coup by his former ally Ely Ould Mohamed Vall unseated Taya in 2005. Vall then quickly restored democracy and facilitated the election of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in 2007.

Abdallahi's reign would prove unstable, however, as he was ousted by a new coup in 2008. Military rule ensued until elections were organised in 2009 and Ould Abdel Aziz, former Commander of the Presidential Guard, was elected president. Subsequent years saw improvements in political stability and economic growth, as well as repressive politics under Aziz. After being shot and recovering in 2012, however, Aziz was re-elected for another five-year term in 2014, in an election boycotted

by the opposition. Aziz altered the constitution in 2017, along with the introduction of a new national flag, but did not seek a feared third term. The 2019 elections were won by his chief of staff, Ould Ghazouani.

Conflict, state fragility, and travel risks

Mauritania is quite high on the 'security risk' indices. Before the corona crisis, in December 2019, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs had put most of the country in the 'red' zone (= high risks, don't travel), most other parts in the 'orange' zone (= only travel if really necessary), and only the western parts in the 'yellow' zone. Currently, in November 2020, all 'danger zoning' has

been disturbed by the global COVID-19 crisis. The East of Mauritania is close to the problematic parts of Mali.

The State Fragility Index of the Fund for Peace puts Mauritania in the 'alert range', with 90.1 points (most negative score would be 120.0 points; for Africa, 'alert' is a relatively problematic category)

(<https://fundforpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/9511904-fragilestatesindex.pdf>). The index consists of twelve variables, and Mauritania has relatively good scores with regard to the quality of the security apparatus and 'uneven development', but problematic scores for the quality of public services and for 'factionalised elites'.



<https://www.worldatlas.com/upload/69/e3/3a/regions-of-mauritania-map.png>

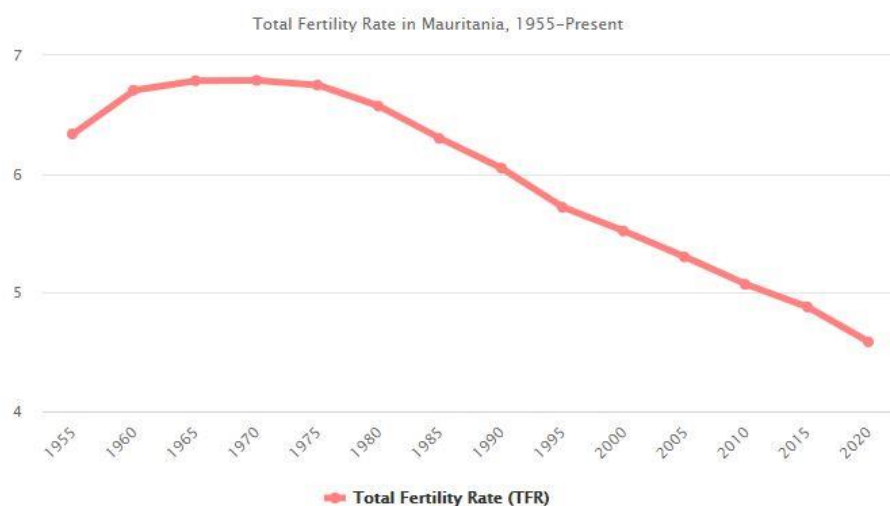
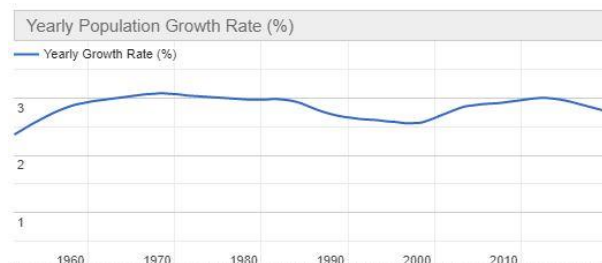
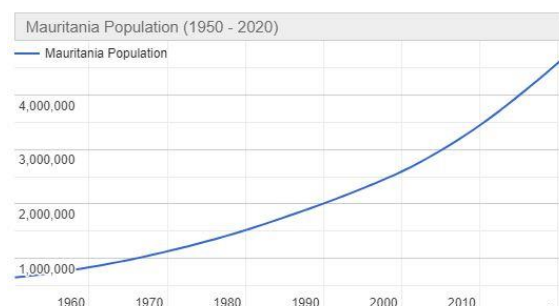
Demography

Mauritania's population increased more than fivefold between 1960 and 2020, from 0.8 million in 1960 to 4.6 million in 2020, mostly through high fertility rates and

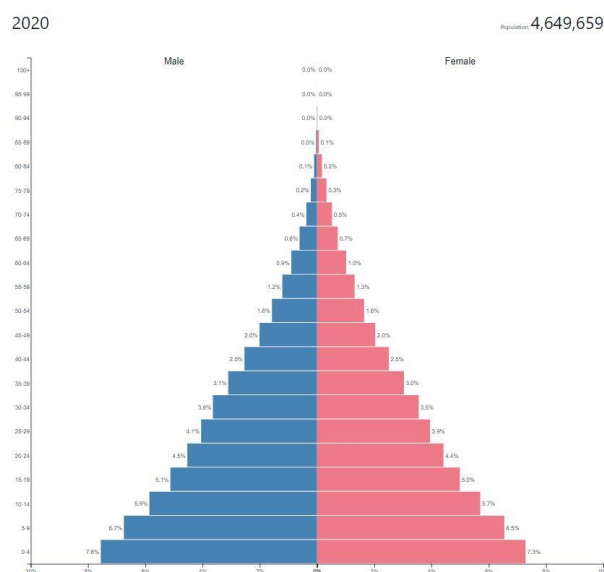
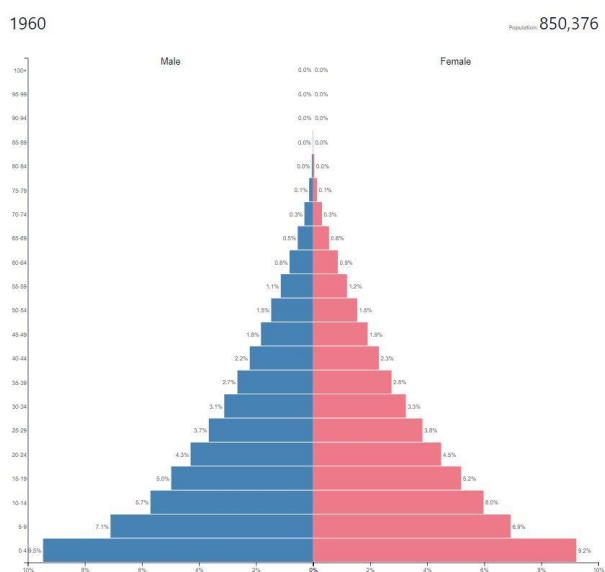
longer life expectancy for both males and females (also because of rapidly improving child and infant mortality figures). Population growth figures were always more than 2.5 percent per year, and beyond three percent per year

between 1963 and 1975, and in 2012. Currently, the average growth rate is around 2.7 percent per year. Total fertility was around 6.7 per woman in 1960; afterwards it diminished, with currently 4.6 births per average woman in Mauritania during her lifetime. As a result of these demographic developments Mauritania has a very skewed

population pyramid, with many more young people than adults and elderly people. The median age changed from 17.8 years old in 1960 to only 16.9 years old in 1975, and is currently 20.1 years old. Urbanisation is on the increase, and has crossed the 50% line between 2010 and 2015.



Source: Worldometers



Source: <https://www.populationpyramid.net/mauritania/>

Demographic statistics, Mauritania as a whole, 1960 and 2020

	1960	2020
Population	0.85 million	4.6 million
Fertility rate	6.7 children per woman	4.6 children per woman
Life expectancy (males)	45 years	64 years
Idem (females)	47 years	67 years
Median age	17.8 years	20.1 years
Infant mortality (< 1 yr)	122/1000	48/1000
Under-5 mortality	233/1000	71/1000
Urbanisation rate	7%	57%
Urban population	0.06 million	2.6 million
Rural population	0.79 million	2.0 million

Source: Worldometers

Human Development Index, Mauritania as a whole, 1990 and 2018

Human Development Index data exist since 1990, with annual UNDP updates. In 1990, Mauritania's Human Development Index started at a level of 0.378. The HDI consists of a health index, an income index and an education index, while UNDP also provides data about life expectancy, and some other indicators. For Mauritania the various components of the HDI all show gradual

improvement. Between 1990 and 2018 Mauritania's population increased from 2.0 million people to 4.4 million people. The increase in the HDI between 1990 and 2018 (from 0.378 to 0.527) can be attributed to improvements in all components: health, education and income, and can also be seen in the data for life expectancy. However, the most significant growth took place in education. Average income levels per capita (in US\$ of 2011, PPP) currently are estimated to be 3.746\$/capita, 40% better than in 1990.

Mauritania: HDI composition and life expectancy; data for 1990 and 2018

	1990	2018	2018/1990
Health Index	.611	.688	1.13
Income Index *	.496	.547	1.10
GNI/capita **	2675	3746	1.40
Education Index	.178	.389	2.19
Mean years of schooling	2.2	4.6	2.09
Expected years of schooling	3.7	8.5	2.30
Life Expectancy	59.7	64.7	1.08
Total HDI index	.378	.527	1.39

Source: <https://globaldatalab.org/> 4.0; * = for 2018 also called 'standard of living component'.

** GNI/capita in US \$ of 2011, PPP.

International migration

In 2015 119,000 people who were born in Mauritania lived outside the country (2.9% of Mauritania's total population of 4.2 million people inside and outside the country during that year), of which 85,000 elsewhere in Africa (mainly Senegal and Mali, in that order), and 34,000 outside Africa (0.8% of Mauritania's total population: most of them in France and Spain; UN migration report 2015). In 2017 Mauritania had around 168,000 immigrants, of which 75,000 with a refugee status. The immigrants mainly came from Mali and Senegal (UN Migration Report 2017). Between 1990 and 2017 the number of immigrants

(including refugees) went up and down, from 112,000 in 1990, down to 57,000 in 2000, and up to 167,000 in 2015.

Trade statistics, Mauritania: exports and imports, 2018

In 2018, Mauritania exported products for a total value of 2.56 billion \$, and imported for a total value of 3.07 billion \$ (mostly from China, France, Morocco, Spain and Belgium, in that order), resulting in a negative trade balance. Leading import products were woven products, wheat, palm oil, and tea, in that order.

The most important export products and most important export destinations in 2018 were:

Main export products (value in \$ million)		Main export destinations (value in \$ million)	
Fish and other sea products	1103	China	735
Iron ore	628	Spain	370
Gold	384	Switzerland	319
Copper ore	195	Côte d'Ivoire	159
Meat	140	Japan	139

Source: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/mrt/>

Protected areas and Forests

Mauritania currently has two national parks, four fauna reserves, three Ramsar sites, and four UNESCO-MAB biosphere reserves

(<http://www.parks.it/world/MR/index.html>). According to Protectedplanet, currently 0.7 million hectares are protected land areas (0.6 % of Mauritania's total area; and this source mentions 9 protected areas;

<https://www.protectedplanet.net/country/Mrt>). There are 16.3 million ha marine protected areas in Mauritania's portion of the Atlantic Ocean (4.2% of its ocean waters).

Mauritania had 0.24 million hectares of forests in 2010 (a tiny portion of its total land area; most of it is desert); between 1990 and 2010 Mauritania has lost 40% of its forest cover

(<https://rainforests.mongabay.com/deforestation/2000/Mauritania.htm>).

Agricultural Mauritania

Crop Area (in 1000 hectares), and total production (in 1000 tonnes), 1961 and 2018, in the order of the crop areas in 2018:

Crops	1961		2018		2018/1961	
	Area	Prod.	Area	Prod.	Area	Prod.
Sorghum	209	81	175	80	0.84	1.00
Rice (paddy)	0	1	44	232	145.7	464.4
Other pulses	20	8	37	22	1.86	2.69
Peas	-	-	26	8	+++	+++
Maize	5	3	23	16	4.50	4.84
Cow peas	23	8	22	8	0.97	1.03
Millet	31	7	12	3	0.38	0.51
Dry beans	-	-	11	13	+++	+++
Dates	5	13	9	22	1.80	1.69
Other crops	8	13	18	31	2.25	2.47
Total crops (area)	301	134	377	435	1.25	

2018/1961: **red** = 2018 is below 1961; **green**: 2018 is more than 5.0 times the 1961 figures (that is: more than population increase in Mauritania from 0.876 million to 4.4 million between 1961 and 2018); black: in-between. Source: Faostat data.

Mauritania's land area is 103 million hectares, and its crop area increased from 0.3% to 0.4% of its land area between 1961 and 2018. Food crop areas did not expand much, with the exception of rice and new crops like peas and beans, as well as maize. The traditional food crops, sorghum and millet, did not do well.

The numbers of all live animals, measured in stock units, expanded less rapidly than Mauritania's population

in these almost sixty years: 180% compared with 500%. The total number of cattle even diminished. Per capita the numbers of live animals in the country diminished from 3.5 (high for African standards) to only 1.1. The best performance can be seen for horses, sheep, and goats, but also the number of camels has increased considerably.

Livestock numbers (x 1000)

	1961	2018	2018/1961
Asses	130	326	2.51
Camels	550	1496	2.72
Cattle	2150	1913	0.89
Chicken	1800	4660	2.59
Goats	2540	7510	2.96
Horses	10	67	6.70
Sheep	3600	11036	3.07
Livestock units	2785	5011	1.80

Source: Faostat data; 1 livestock unit = based on 1.0 camels; 0.7 cattle, asses and horses; 0.1 goats/sheep; 0.01 chicken.

Urban Mauritania

Mauritania's urban population increased from only 59,000 people in 1960 (only 7% of its national population at Independence) to 2.6 million in 2020 (57%). Growth has been rapid for all cities. Between 1960 and 2020 the

population increase was at least tenfold in all cities. An extremely rapid development took place in and around the capital city Nouakchott, still a small settlement in 1960, and now an agglomeration with more than one million inhabitants.



<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ab/Mr-map.png>

Major urban areas in Mauritania

Cities (and region)	Population in thousands of inhabitants			
	Macrotrends: 1960	Wikipedia: census 2013	Worldometers, city, as given in 2020	Populationstat, City and Urban area, 2019
Nouakchott	5	958	661	1335
Nouadhibou	(3)	118	72	(200)
Nema, incl Mbera Refugee Camp (Nodh ech Chargui)	-	15+48	60	...
Kaedi (Gorgol)	...	46	55	...
Rosso (Brakna)	...	34	49	...
Kiffa (Assiba)	...	50	40	...
Zouérate (Tiris Zemmour)	...	45	38	...

Source for 2020: <https://www.worldometers.info>; also: <https://populationstat.com/mauritania/>; for 2013 (census year): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cities_in_Mauritania; For 1960: <https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/21821/nouakchott/population>; and https://www.persee.fr/doc/caoum_0373-5834_1963_num_16_63_2308 (then Nouadhibou was called Port Etienne).

Regional Inequality

Map	Region / Région	Population x 1000		'18/'90
		1990	2018	
	Adrar	50	100	2.00
	Assaba	190	470	2.47
	Brakna	200	420	2.10
	Gorgol	220	390	1.77
	Guidimagha	130	310	2.38
	Hodh Charghi	200	480	2.40
	Hodh Gharbi	210	340	1.62
	Inchiri	10	10	1.00
	Nouadhibou	80	140	1.75
	Tagant	40	120	3.00
	Tiris-Zemmour	30	70	2.33
	Trarza/ Nouakchott	700	1560	2.23
Total Mauritania		2030	4400	2.17

Source: <https://globaldatalab.org> 4.0; map: <https://www.worldatlas.com/upload/69/e3/3a/regions-of-mauritania-map.png>

Mauritania has 12 Regions. Between 1990 and 2018 all regions except one experienced population growth; the highest growth happened in Tagant, an area in the centre-south of the country. If we look at the regional data for human development, which for Mauritania exist since 1990, we see that across the board improvements have taken place between 1990 and 2018. Both in 1990 and in

2018 the best conditions existed in Nouadhibou for the HDI index as a whole, and for life expectancy in 2018. In 1990 life expectancy was highest in Inchiri near Nouadhibou in the Northwest, and so was the education index. However, something dramatic must have happened in Inchiri: it had the slowest development of the overall HDI and the education index, while its life expectancy even

started to drop from 2001 onwards, and reached only 59 years in 2009, to recover slowly afterwards, but to the lowest level of the country in 2018. Inchiri also was the region with a stagnant (and very low) population, according to globaldatalab¹. The worst life expectancy was shared with Guidimagha in the south, and that region also

had and has the lowest HDI level and the lowest education index (in 1990), although in both cases with the fastest growth (in 2018 that worst position had shifted to Gorgol). As a result, regional inequality in the country became less extreme between 1990 and 2018.

Region	Subregional HDI			Life expectancy			Education index		
	1990	2018	18/90	1990	2018	18/90	1990	2018	18/90
Adrar	361	556	1.54	53	65	1.23	195	450	2.31
Assaba	354	485	1.37	65	66	1.02	146	321	2.20
Brakna	343	509	1.48	62	64	1.03	135	370	2.74
Gorgol	313	446	1.42	59	64	1.08	111	266	2.40
Guidimagha	273	441	1.62	55	61	1.11	83	281	3.39
Hodh Charghi	337	465	1.38	56	63	1.13	163	318	1.95
Hodh Gharbi	358	465	1.30	61	68	1.11	167	298	1.78
Inchiri	483	541	1.12	71	61	0.86	249	418	1.68
Nouadhibou	450	638	1.42	61	70	1.15	231	485	2.10
Tagant	358	524	1.46	66	67	1.02	150	385	2.57
Tiris-Zemmour	427	592	1.39	58	62	1.07	228	489	2.14
Trarza/ Nouakchott	434	587	1.35	61	65	1.07	234	475	2.03
Total	378	527	1.39	60	65	1.08	178	389	2.19
Inequality	1.6	1.4		1.3	1.1		3.0	1.7	

SHDI and Education Index x1000; all data from <https://globaldatalab.org> 4.0

If we compare 2018 with 1990, the education situation has improved very much, with the fastest improvements in Guidimagha, and the relatively slowest improvements in

Inchiri. The regional differences in education became less pronounced, but are still considerable.

Region	Income/capita (2011 US\$ PPP)		
	1990	2018	18/90
Adrar	2258	3883	1.72
Assaba	1855	2845	1.53
Brakna	2153	3291	1.53
Gorgol	2090	2600	1.24
Guidimagha	2072	2520	1.22
Hodh Charghi	1707	2327	1.36
Hodh Gharbi	1804	2110	1.17
Inchiri	4439	5374	1.21
Nouadhibou	6512	9692	1.49
Tagant	1729	3137	1.81
Tiris-Zemmour	5023	7708	1.53
Trarza/ Nouakchott	4022	5604	1.39
Total	2675	3746	1.40
Inequality	3.8	4.2	

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inchiri_Region. Wikipedia reports a growing population between 2011 and 2016, from 16,000 to 20,000, so higher than the 10,000 reported for both 1990 and 2018 by globaldatalab. There is no hint to any crisis in Inchiri. However,

we found an indication of what happened on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guelb_Moghrein_Mine: Inchiri is a copper production zone and in 2012-2014 there was severe labour unrest that forced the mine to shut down for a while.

The economic situation, as measured by the average income per capita situation, improved everywhere, but the highest growth was experienced in Tagant, in centre-south, and the slowest growth in Hodh Gharbi in the southeast. The highest average incomes existed and exist in harbor city Nouadhibou in the extreme northwest, the place where Mauritania's iron and copper ore is exported from. The worst income situations existed and exist in the southeast, the areas near the troubled war and insurgency zones of Mali. Regional income inequality in Mauritania is

extremely high, and became higher between 1990 and 2018.

Of course, these are average income figures and based on (rough) estimates. Regional inequality is not the same as income or wealth inequality, which are also relatively high in Mauritania. According to World Bank data (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?end=2014&locations=MR&start=1993>) the GINI-coefficient jumped up and down: from 44 in 1987, via 37 in 1995 and 40 in 2004, to 36 in 2008, and 33 in 2014.



Further Reading

Country Portal: <http://countryportal.ascleiden.nl/mauritania>

Selected publications:

<https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/africa-2020-further-reading#Mauritania>

<https://www.ascleiden.nl/africa2020>

Country Information: Ton Dietz, David Ehrhardt and Fenneken Veldkamp

Country Portal: Harro Westra

Selected publications: Germa Seuren

African Studies Centre Leiden, November 2020