MSDG PROJECT
MIGRATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE GAMBIA

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Notes on the Emergence of the Gambian Diaspora

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1. Geography and Population

The Gambia is the smallest country in mainland Africa, with a population of about 2 million. The total area is 11,300 sq. km, consisting of 10,120 sq. km of land mass and 1,180 sq. km of bodies of water, mainly the River Gambia. The river flows across the middle, dividing the country into the North and South banks. The Gambia is surrounded on three sides by Senegal, and has a western Atlantic coastline of about 80 sq. km. The 2013 national census put the population at 1.857 million, and UNFPA 'State of the World Population' puts it at 2.2 million in 2018. The Gambia is amongst the most densely populated countries in Africa at 177 people per sq. km, with a very high population growth rate of 3.1%, and a high urban concentration of 60%[1, 2, 3].

UN DESA puts the Gambian population in 2017 at 2.101 million, with Gambians living abroad estimated at 90,000, being 4.3% of the population. As discussed below, this number of the Gambian diaspora is an underestimation. The number of non-Gambians living in Gambia is estimated at 205,063, being 9.8% of the population[4]. Research commissioned by the Directorate General of Senegalese Abroad (DGSE) claims that 19.6% of the 643,640 Senegalese migrants (i.e. 126,150) live in The Gambia, and other DGSE data puts the number even higher[5]. This corresponds with the UN DESA estimate that about 60% of migrants in The Gambia are Senegalese (with migrants from Guinea Conakry forming about 25% of the migrant stock).

2. Governance and Political Change

After a presence of about two centuries, Britain took The Gambia under its colonial administration on 17 October 1821. After 140 years, the first set of elections that involved all regions of The Gambia was held in May 1960. In May and July 1961, Constitutional Conferences were held in Bathurst (Banjul) and London to agree terms for independence. The second national election was held in May 1962. On 4 October 1963, The Gambia gained full internal self-government under an elected Prime Minister, and became politically independent from Britain on 18 February 1965, with The Queen remaining Head of State. On 24 April 1970, The Gambia became a Republic under an elected President, and a member of the Commonwealth. As an operating parliamentary democracy, elections were held every five years in March 1972 and April 1977. On 30 July 1981, there was an attempted coup, and in the aftermath, presidential elections were introduced. Parliamentary and presidential elections were subsequently held in May 1982, March 1987 and April 1992.

[1] Gambia Bureau of Statistics - www.gbos.gov.gm
[2] https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/print_ga.html
[3] https://gambia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/State%20of%20World%20Population%20Report%202018.pdf
[4] http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates15.shtml
[5] Research by Prof. Abdoulaye Seck of Universite Chiekh Anta Diop, communicated to Prof. Gibril Faal in April 2018

On 22 July 1994, the army took over power and The Gambia was under a brutal and murderous dictatorship until 19 January 2017. The dictator lost the presidential elections of 1 December 2016 and conceded defeat on the next day. On 9 December 2016, he withdrew his concession, rejected the election results and declared his intention to remain in office. This created a dangerous political impasse and a flow of refugees who feared an outbreak of political violence. After the dictator rebuffed the diplomatic efforts of the Economic Commission for West African States (ECOWAS), the President-Elect left the country on 14 January 2017 to join ECOWAS leaders in Mali, before travelling to Senegal. On 19 January 2017, he was sworn in as the new President of the Republic of The Gambia whilst in Senegal. On the same day, ECOWAS sent a military intervention force to The Gambia. The dictator left the country to be exiled in Equatorial Guinea on 21 January 2017, and the new President returned to The Gambia from Senegal on 26 January.[6, 7]

3. Migratory Patterns in Post-Colonial Gambia

The Gambia is a small country with big migration. This is a recent phenomenon. For the first 15 years of independence (1965 to 1980), migration was limited. Low skilled workers, artisanal diamond miners and itinerant traders settled in neighbouring West African countries, following ancient migratory routes dating back to the Mali Empire of the 13th-15th century. As there was no University in the country until 1999, higher education students also travelled to Commonwealth countries, mainly Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana, the United Kingdom (and later to the United States). These students were short term migrants as the vast majority of them returned home after their studies. The small Gambian diaspora of the 1960s/70s can be classified into five main categories:

- Firstly, traders, workers and adventurists settled in African countries;
- Secondly, those referred to as 'old-timers' who settled in the UK in the 1950s and 1960s as part of the post-World War II inflow of workers;
- Thirdly, the students in the US who settled after their studies;
- Fourthly, the mostly low skilled young men who migrated to the Nordic countries (mainly Sweden, Denmark and Norway), following the development of the tourism industry;
- Fifthly, the small numbers of people referred to as 'hustlers', who stowed away in cargo ships, or travelled across the Sahara as irregular migrants.

The last group tended to stay in Southern Europe, mainly Greece and Spain, before resettling in Western Europe. To a great extent, this post-colonial migratory pattern defined the current migration profile of The Gambia.

[6] Hughes, Arnold and Perfect, David (2008), Historical Dictionary of The Gambia, Fourth Edition, The Scarecrow Press, Plymouth
[7] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/26/the-gambias-new-president-adama-barrow-to-return-home

4. Emergence of a Sense of a Gambian Diaspora

Between 1980 and 1994, there was growing political frustration among young people who thought that independence had not delivered adequate economic benefits and social justice. The government was headed by the same President (Sir Dawda Jawara) who had been in power since 1963 (as Prime Minister). In July 1981, civilian plotters working with elements within the national paramilitary force attempted to overthrow the government, leading to the deaths of 100s of people. Senegal, which surrounds The Gambia except for the Atlantic coast, intervened militarily to restore the rule of the incumbent President. In the 1980s and early 1990s, new migratory patterns emerged. Gambian students started to settle in the countries where they study, or sought other opportunities internationally, rather than returning home. This period also saw an intensification of migration to the US and UK, not only by students, but by low-skilled and unskilled workers. Economic migrants used no-visa policies to the Nordic countries to settle outside Gambia. As the migrants raised families abroad, the sense of a Gambian diaspora began to emerge in a number of European countries and in the USA.

5. Dictatorship and the Emergence of Gambian Diaspora in Development

In July 1994, the army, which was formed after the 1981 rebellion, overthrew the government in a bloodless coup. This was followed by mass detentions without trial and other forms of human rights abuses. By November 1994, the coup leaders had started killing suspected opponents within the army. 1995 saw a draconian onslaught by the junta, leading to the murder of the civilian Finance Minister in June 1995. Through national and international pressure, the military government agreed to a two-year transition to civilian rule. A new constitution was drafted and adopted, stripped of democratic guarantees such as presidential term limits. In 1996, the military dictator, Yaya Jammeh, transformed his military junta into a political party and contested the presidential elections. His disputed victory in the September 1996 elections began a further 20-year dictatorship which ended on 19 January 2017. The brutal dictatorship was characterised by murders, disappearances, detentions, venal corruption and gross maladministration. This created an unprecedented outflow of 1,000s of Gambian refugees, and intensified economic and general outward migration. Consequently, a relatively large Gambian diaspora emerged, actively involved in supporting the economy through their remittances, whilst trying to dislodge the dictatorship through democratic advocacy.

As the political and economic situation deteriorated in The Gambia, the Gambian diaspora assumed a greater role in financing basic needs and economic activities back home, whilst intensifying the struggle to restore democracy in the country. As part of his first attendance of the United Nations General Assembly, the new President of The Gambia Adama Barrow held a town hall meeting with the Gambian diaspora in New York on 23 September 2017. The Migration and Sustainable Development in The Gambia (MSDG) Project (a diaspora-led initiative) provided technical support in preparation to this meeting, where the President delivered a Diaspora Policy statement. President Adama Barrow declared that:

> *"Some of you are regular visitors to The Gambia, and others have suffered the pain and isolation of exile, caused by 22 years of dictatorship. Yet, all of you, through different ways, have maintained your emotional and developmental ties with our great country.....On behalf of the government and the people of The Gambia and indeed on my own behalf, I express gratitude to you for your continued and enormous contributions to national development. During the last two decades of dictatorship, you may have hated the brutal government, but you continued to love your country. The diaspora contributed ideas and finances, demonstrated fortitude and tenacity, and used its networks and privileges to help deliver our country from*

oppression. As a result, you have covered yourselves in glory, and history will attest to your courage and commitment."

"I strongly hope that you will be able to work closely with the coalition government, so that your inputs and efforts are enhanced and multiplied, leading to inclusive and sustainable development. I am here in New York, attending the Seventy-Second session of the United Nations General Assembly. The UN recognises the connection between migration and diaspora development, a fact reflected in Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals. It is therefore appropriate for me to take the opportunity of this official trip, to outline how my government plans to work with the diaspora, for Gambia's development.....We have listened to your hopes and aspirations. We have heard your concerns and frustrations. Now, we are working with experts and partners, who have helped us develop meaningful 'Diaspora Engagement Action Points' as part of our programme for 'Migration and Sustainable Development in The Gambia." [8]

6. Current Status of the Gambian Diaspora

The current Gambian diaspora evolved from the following main processes:

- Firstly, many of the Gambians who were outside the country aborted their plans to return home and decided to settle abroad, due to the prevalent dictatorship;

- Secondly, greater numbers sought higher education in the UK and the USA and very high percentage of these students decided to remain abroad;

- Thirdly, high numbers of people sought refugee status or became economic migrants in Senegal, UK, the USA and Nordic countries;

- Fourthly, irregular migration of young people (including children) through the Sahara and Mediterranean 'backway' became a major phenomenon. These migrants settled mainly in Spain, Italy and Germany;

- Fifthly, the number of second and third generation Gambian diaspora grew exponentially.

People living abroad who are of Gambian nationality, origin or heritage constitute the Gambian diaspora. The Gambian diaspora is wide and inclusive, encompassing short and long term migrants, as well as second and multiple generations. Being a member of the Gambian diaspora is determined not only through maintenance or acquisition of nationality and citizenship, but also through emotional and nationhood affinities. The strong sense of belonging to The Gambia is what motivates and propels the diaspora to contribute to the development of the country.

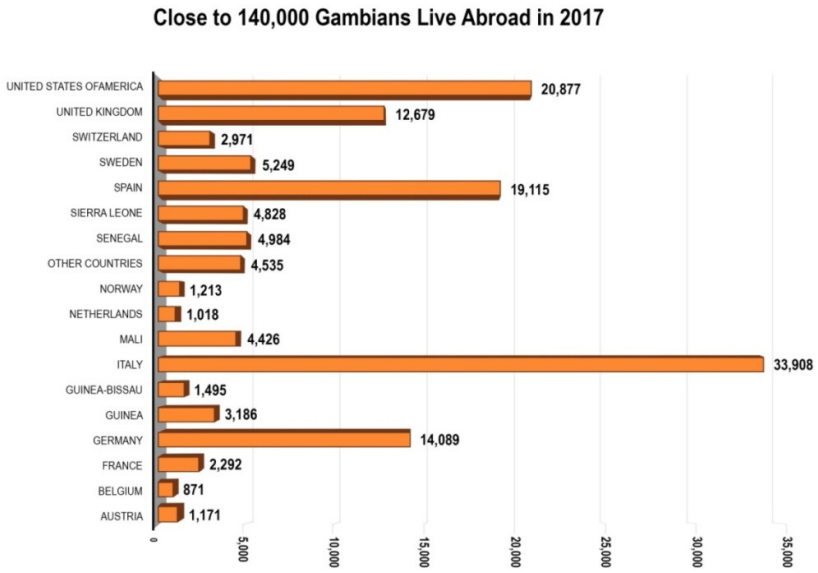
[8] http://gambiandiaspora.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/MSDG-BP-1-Highlights-of-Presidential-Diaspora-Policy-Speech-Sep-2017.pdf

The fact that the diaspora is resident outside of the country is an opportunity to be harnessed. The UN recognises the positive nexus between migration, diaspora and development, a fact reflected in Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, and the newly adopted Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. On 13 January 2018, at the First Stake in the Nation Forum (SNF1) convened by the MSDG Project, the President launched the Gambia Diaspora Strategy, and declared the diaspora as the non-resident Eighth Region of The Gambia.

7. Gambian Diaspora Statistics

In 2015, the Population Division of the UN DESA estimated that the number of Gambian migrants living in different parts of the world was about 90,000.[9] This was recognised as an underestimate. The current estimate is that there are about 140,000 Gambian migrants (Kebbeh 2017)[10]. This latest figure uses data from the national statistical institutions in countries with high numbers of Gambians. If we estimate the population of The Gambia to be about 2 million, then Gambian migrants constitute 7% of the population. Only 3% of the world population are migrants. Thus the incidence of migration amongst Gambians is more than double the global average.

Furthermore, the estimated stock of Gambian migrants does not necessarily include all the irregular migrants. It also largely excludes the second and third generation Gambians, who are born and bred abroad, but maintain an emotional and developmental link to The Gambia. According to UNICEF, nearly 0.5 percent of Gambia's population migrate from the country every year – the highest rate in Africa.[11] From population and national development perspectives, the Gambian diaspora is a very important constituency of the country. The top ten countries of residence for Gambian migrants are: Italy, United States, Spain, Germany, United Kingdom, Sweden, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Mali and Guinea Conakry.



A Statistical Portrait of Gambians Living Abroad (2017) (Source – C.O. Kebbeh, Washington)

[9] UN DESA (2015) Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2015 revision (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2015), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, New York

[10] Kebbeh, C. Omar (2017) A Statistical Portrait of Gambians Living Abroad, Washington DC

[11] https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/gambia/23696/node/23696_cs

Top 10 Countries of Residence for the Gambian Diaspora *Based on Kebbeh (2017)*		
No.	**Country**	**No. Of Gambians**
1.	Italy	**33,908**
2.	United States of America	**20,877**
3.	Spain	**19,115**
4.	Germany	**14,089**
5.	United Kingdom	**12,679**
6.	Sweden	**5,249**
7.	Senegal	**4,984**
8.	Sierra Leone	**4,828**
9.	Mali	**4,426**
10.	Guinea Conakry	**3,186**

It is likely that the Gambian diaspora, comprising just migrants and their children who are entitled to Gambian citizenship is over 200,000. This estimate is based, amongst other things, on the following analytical observations:

- The current estimate of the number of Gambians abroad is broadly based on national censuses and data from formal institutions. A significant number of Gambian migrants, especially non-refugee irregular migrants, are not featured in censuses or other official data.

- In countries like Italy and Germany with the highest numbers of Gambian refugees and asylum seekers, the data on those categories of migrants are comprehensive and reliable, and they are very high. Similarly, in a country like Spain, where residents need to register with government authorities (irrespective of immigration status) in order to access services such as healthcare and education, the number of Gambians recorded is high. This suggests that there is a significant underestimate of Gambian migrants in countries where there is no advantage for irregular migrants to register with authorities. (2018 data indicate much higher numbers of Gambian in Germany and Spain).

- Migrant data collection in Africa is not as comprehensive or reliable as in Spain for example. The African country with the highest Gambian migrant population is Senegal, registering about 5,000 Gambians, fewer than the number in Sweden. The number of Gambians living in Senegal and other African countries is likely to be much higher than reported.

- Most migrant data miss an important part of the diaspora, namely second and third generations. Even if a conservative assumption is made, that 50% of settled Gambian diaspora on average have two children, then tens of thousands of second generation Gambians are missed from diaspora population data.

As part of the MSDG Project, further studies will be undertaken to assess the population, location, profile and other characteristics of the Gambian diaspora, for the purpose of improving engagement and development policy and practice. Under the auspices of the Gambia Diaspora Directorate, the MSDG Project will work with the Gambia Bureau of Statistics (GBOS), embassies and consulates, diaspora organisations, national statistical agencies in countries of residence, and other relevant migration and research institutions.