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*Pilar Requena del Río**

The Gambia: Could it be an example of how to combat migration at the origin?

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The Gambia: Could it be an example of how to combat migration at the origin?

Abstract:

The Gambia is a tiny country in Western Africa that entered a new era of freedom, justice, reconciliation and development after the end of a dictatorship in January 2017. One of its big challenges is the migration of its youths to Europe pursuing a better life. In the last years, Gambia has become a kind of laboratory for the international community of how to combat its root causes and give young people perspectives for the future. The European Union, the International Trade Center and the IOM are the main international stakeholders involved. Returnees from Libya as well are making awareness around the country. The slogan: You can make it in The Gambia!

Keywords:

Migration, Europe, IOM, European Union, UN, returnees, youth, Trust Fund Africa, International Trade Center.

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Introduction

The Gambia is the smallest country of continental Africa and also one of the poorest of the world. With two millions inhabitants, it is a narrow strip along the river Gambia surrounded mostly by Senegal. Its population is made up of different ethnic groups. It gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1965.

Until December 2016 it was one of the most forgotten countries in the world although it was suffering a terrible dictatorship since 22 years. All changed then. Despite the victory of the opposition in the elections, the authoritarian president, Yahyah Jammeh, tried to remain in office. He went finally into exile in January 2017 after the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), backed up by the rest of the international community, pressed him to go. The dictator was overthrown by a combination of diplomacy and military threat.

This opened the door to the winner of the elections, Adama Barrow. A new era began amidst big challenges. President Barrow and his government were confronted with a broken state. The European Union came to help with more than 225 million euros. In May 2018, The Gambia got a pledge of 1.45 billion euros from the International Conference for The Gambia to meet the needs for its National Development Plan.

A youthful nation

The Gambia is among the 15 least developed countries of the world. It is heavily reliant on subsistence farming, with few industries or natural resources and with a youth unemployment rate of over 40 percent. Around half of the population lives below the poverty line. "We are talking about poverty, illiteracy, health care system, social protection system. The challenges are tremendous"¹, says Attila Lajos, Ambassador of the European Union to The Gambia.

According to the 2018 National Survey on the Labor Force released in March 2019, over 200.000 Gambians are unemployed. There are also more females than males unemployed and more unemployed living in the rural areas compared to the urban².

¹ Interview of the author with Attila Lajos, EU Ambassador to The Gambia. The Gambia, 7/11/18.

² Ndegene Secka, Mam. More Than 200 Thousand Gambians Unemployed-Survey. The Chronicle. Mar 27, 2019. Available at: <https://www.chronicle.gm/more-than-200-thousand-gambians-unemployed-survey/> Consulted 25/05/19.

“Youth unemployment is one of the big challenges and a big problem. Another problem is mistrust between government and young people. Government needs to put in place deliberate measures to be able to create opportunities for them and address this concern. These measures must include empowering young people, giving them the skills for employment. Government should put up strategies that are job suppliers”³, claims Lamin Darboe, Executive Director of the National Youth Council (NYC).

The Gambia is a youthful nation. It has a high birth rate. Creating jobs and perspectives for the growing number of youths is a key challenge. “65% of the population are young people who want a better life. They are exposed to social media and they know what they want. We have to remain here and build up our country for generations to come”, warns Ismaila Ceesay, lecturer at the University of The Gambia and political analyst⁴.

According to the latest Afrobarometer survey, many young and highly educated African citizens are considering migrating in search of opportunities. “In The Gambia, 29% say they have thought “a lot” about emigrating and 27% say they’ve “somehow” thought about it. The potential emigrants are overwhelmingly motivated by hunger for jobs and economic opportunity”⁵.

Migration, a big challenge

Migration is a traditional way of life in The Gambia. The country has the sad mark of being one of the highest contributors of illegal migrants to Europe, according to the UNICEF Annual Report 2017⁶. Around 1 in 20 migrants arriving in Italy are Gambians, making them Europe’s second largest diaspora per capita. The share of migrants has reached almost 10% of the population⁷. Remittances account for almost 20 per cent of

³ Interview of the author with Lamin Darboe, Executive Director of the National Youth Council (NYC). The Gambia, 1/11/18.

⁴ Interview of the author with Ismaila Ceesay, Senior Lecturer of Political Science at the University of The Gambia and Political Analyst. The Gambia, 1/11/18.

⁵ Jeffang, Kebba. 56 Percent of Gambians Considered Emigrating. The Chronicle, Mar 26, 2019. Available at: <https://www.chronicle.gm/56-percent-of-gambians-considered-emigrating-afrobarometer/> Consulted 25/05/19.

⁶ Available at: [https://www.unicef.org/about/annualreport/files/Gambia_\(the\)_2017_COAR.PDF](https://www.unicef.org/about/annualreport/files/Gambia_(the)_2017_COAR.PDF). Consulted 29/05/19.

⁷ Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gambia/overview> Consulted 29/05/19.

the country's gross domestic product (GDP). This makes the country the ninth-most dependent world economy on transfers from the diaspora⁸.

"The government is not addressing the issue seriously. A collective effort is needed. Money should come directly to young people. We have to invest in agriculture. The majority of the people live in rural areas. We have to invest in the people, in education, train and empower them"⁹, says the university student Mustapha Kah.

Ambassador Lajos describes the situation as challenging and as an example of a potentially successful story of transition from bitter dictatorship to democracy. But he also recognizes that it is a process that takes years and decades and "we are at the very beginning of it"¹⁰.

As Ismaila Ceesay points out, there are different reasons for migration:

- People sit now in their homes and see how is life in Europe and then they want to go.
- They are getting poorer, a lot of young people are unemployed and discriminated because of it and so they will have to leave.
- Even if they have a job, they are underpaid. There are no opportunities at all to have a decent life¹¹.

"The country has failed to make opportunities available. The families are also pressing them. Some families even sell their lands to give them the money to go. They think they may be successful or they might not be successful but they want to try"¹², adds Mustapha Kah.

As Lamin Darboe also recognizes, "most of the ones who leave are economic migrants. They need jobs, decent jobs, to take care of their families"¹³. Many have left because, despite having a job, they didn't get sufficient money or perspectives. Their values are also affected if they can't take care of their families despite hard working.

⁸ Annual Remittances Data (updated Dec. 2018). Consulted 25/03/19. Available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data>

⁹ Interview of the author with Mustapha Kah, student's representative at the University of The Gambia and Youth Commissioner at the TRRC. The Gambia, 2/11/18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Attila Lajos.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Ismaila Ceesay.

¹² *Ibid.* Mustapha Kah.

¹³ *Ibid.* Lamin Darboe.

Raimund Moser, adviser of the International Trade Center, acknowledges that there are other reasons too. “Even if you have an interesting job here, you have a society that values you higher when you go. This is the problem. It is also this cultural social perspective. You have a neighbor, a family member, who is making a house or a better one because someone is sending money back. What you conclude is: if I send my children away, I will be able to have the same sort of situation”¹⁴.

“This belief is deeply embedded in the society, in communities, in families. It started in the 60s, 70s, since independence. Gambians believe that you can only really grow in your family existence, in your well-being, if you have in the developed world a relative who sends home remittances”¹⁵, admits Ambassador Lajos.

This cultural belief is also part of the reality and of the root causes for migration. In many cases, they don't migrate because they decide so, but because they are sent by their families, or even by their communities that sponsored the trip. There are also migrants who take the back way more than once out of desperation if they fail the first time. “I think this is the belief we have to change, but to achieve such a social change you have to invest efforts on and on and for many years to come”¹⁶, says the EU Ambassador.

The destiny is Europe. With the money they send their families (sometimes also their extended families and communities) they can eat and pay the children's school fees. And they can also build a house or rebuild and refurnish their old ones. This has become a kind of Gambian dream and part of the imagery. Nobody dared to doubt about it until recent times.

“They believe their success is outside and that opportunities here are limited. But the future here is bright but challenging. We come together to bring down dictatorship, why don't we come together to fight poverty? Poverty is our new enemy. This is our common way”¹⁷, says lawyer Salieu Taal. Lamin Darboe adds “they also want to travel to either satisfy their curiosity or for educational reasons. They have applied for visas and have paid the taxes. Some get their visa rejected and don't get their money back. And some

¹⁴ Interview of the author with Raimund Moser, Programme Development Adviser, Project Manager–Gambia YEP. International Trade Center. The Gambia, 2/11/18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Attila Lajos.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Attila Lajos.

¹⁷ Interview of the author with Salieu Taal. Taal is a lawyer and founder and activist of the movement “Gambia has decided”. The Gambia, 8/11/18.

think: instead of applying for a visa that will be rejected, let's invest the money in the way to Europe"¹⁸. There are also cases where you are refused a visa even though you have been invited to a conference or obtained a scholarship, or when you want to visit family or friends.

The Gambia as a laboratory

The EU is trying to test the idea if creating more opportunities and making the country a better place to live, would mean fewer migrants because then they won't want to leave. This will mean less migrants landing on Europe's shores or dying even before arriving. The Gambia, in many ways, is a perfect laboratory to test this hypothesis. It is working in different fields with international and local partners. The aim is to give young people a perspective, skills, capacities to get a job or to put in place their own business.

The European Union has mobilized around 348 million euros from all kind of EU funds for a lot of different projects. With the EU as the biggest donor, there are several organizations working to decrease the illegal migration, the growing dangers associated with it and helping Gambians who return to resettle. Under these organizations the most relevant are the European Union with its Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF)¹⁹ and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The European Union works with a comprehensive approach, doing something for those who are in the member states, for those who are in transit, on the route, for those who are in the country and are potential migrants and for those who return voluntarily.

"We contracted the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to implement a kind of readmission project. It is for 3 years with a budget of 3.9 million for the time being"²⁰, explains Ambassador Lajos. It is done with the collaboration of the Ministry of Interior and other services.

Another plan is the Youth Empowerment Project (YEP). In this case, the International Trade Center is implementing it with a budget of 11 million from the Trust Fund for 4 years. Key objectives are skills development, entrepreneurship support, addressing the root causes, targeting potential migrants and those who return. It aims to support 4,000

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Lamin Darboe.

¹⁹ Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/content/homepage_en

²⁰ *Ibid.* Attila Lajos.

youths in skills development and another 4,000 in entrepreneurship and access to finance. They want also to have impact on young people upcountry.

“The YEP project is extremely important because it is fantastically successful, extremely popular, very much appreciated by government services and by the youths themselves. It is something really tangible, skills development, training, but also giving mini-grants to those young entrepreneurs to start up their businesses”²¹, emphasizes the EU Ambassador. This last issue is very important. In The Gambia, if you ask for a loan as a company, the bank will apply an extremely high profit rate and will also require a lot of administrative requirements. This is something unbearable for the youths.

EU member states agencies are also implementing different additional programs for the youth. All together the EU intervention specifically from the Trust Fund will reach roughly 36/37 million which is like a 10% of the overall sum.

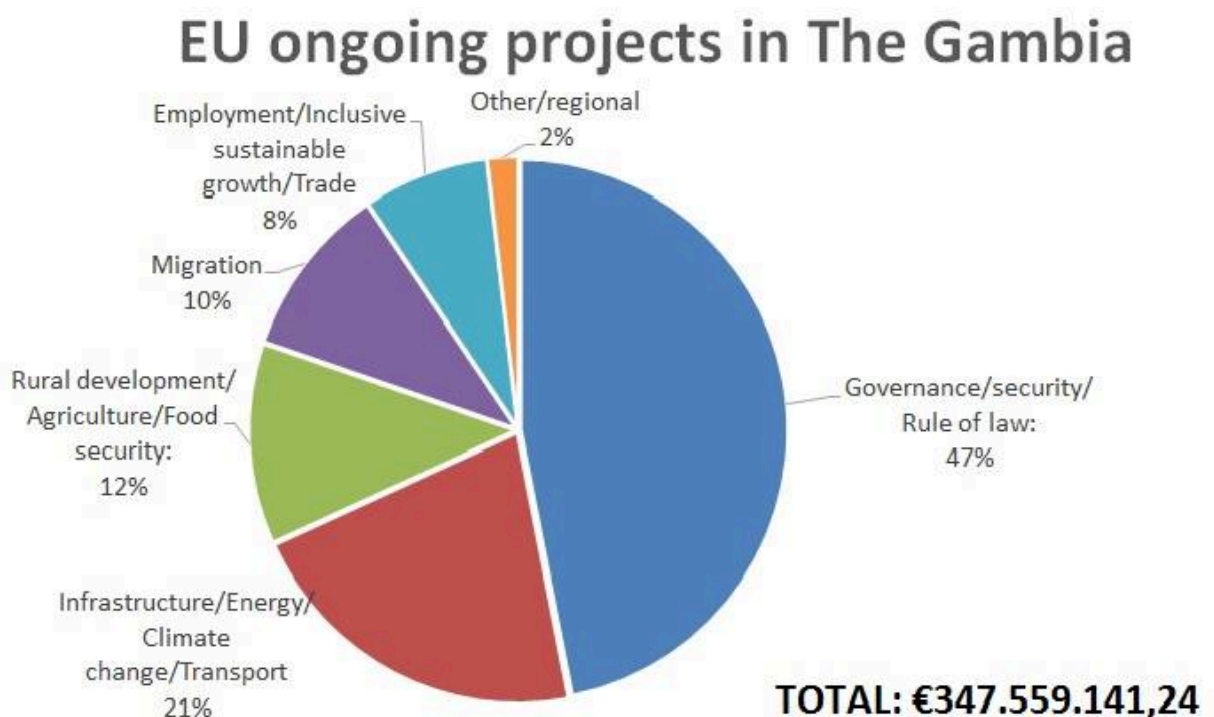


Figure 1: EU ongoing projects in The Gambia. Source: European Union in The Gambia.

²¹ *Ibid.* Attila Lajos.

EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration

This initiative was launched in November 2017 and is funded by the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) and implemented in close collaboration with 26 countries in North Africa, Horn of Africa and the Sahel and Lake Chad region. It aims to facilitate the sustainable reintegration of returning migrants and to contribute to strengthen migration governance. The Gambia is part of it and its objective here is to ensure that Gambians will opt to migrate via regular means as a matter of choice rather than necessity.

Migrants who return may encounter a number of challenges and this will affect their ability to readjust to life and reestablish themselves, equally impacting other members of their community. The issue is to support both migrants' and their communities' economic, social and psychosocial needs. And also additional factors resulting from the migration experience itself, such as debt, separation or trauma have to be taken into account.

Reintegration packages are offered to migrants. This helps them rebuild their lives. The initiative tries also to change the mindset of Gambians, to encourage them to view their country as a place with opportunities and potential. The three-year project is funded by the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) with a total of 3.9 million euros.

The main objectives are:

- To help 1,500 migrants returning to the Gambia to reintegrate into their communities of origin and to contribute to strengthen the government's capacity to provide sustainable reintegration support, including specialized assistance for vulnerable migrants.
- To raise awareness in 250 communities and 2,500 potential migrants of safe migration options and alternatives to irregular migration.
- To support national and local authorities and development partners in having access to data on migration factors, flows and trends to support evidence-based policy development and programs.

This initiative looks also to ensure that migrant rights and dignity are respected, that returning migrants are able to contribute positively to their communities and that the migration process is safer and better managed. The purpose is saving lives by assisting those en route, offering voluntary return assistance to those who want it and providing reintegration support to returning migrants and their communities.

“We provide pocket money when they arrive because they come back penniless. We are working closely with government, private sector, UN, other international organizations and NGOs that are on the ground. We refer our returnees to the most appropriate services given by other partners. Our belief is that the weaknesses here are structural. So we have to build the capacities of the local partners”²², explains Fumiko Nagano, IOM Chief of Mission in The Gambia.

She emphasizes: “Some of them need psychosocial assistance to rehabilitate, to be able to reintegrate. But the services here don’t really provide it. Capacity needs to be built in many sectors to be able to provide quality assistance to the returnees. Stigma is also one thing we have to deal with and in a country like The Gambia talking about health issues is not very easy”²³. When they come back, they are so ashamed that they can’t even face their families and some even decide not to go back to their places of origin. Ambassador Lajos insists in this aspect: “Migrants who return because they are unable to get to Europe are often look down upon by other Gambians who believe that they simply did not try hard enough”²⁴.

Therefore, the reintegration package has different forms according to the different needs. “We don’t treat all the same because there are also vulnerable cases, explains further Etienne Micallef of the IOM, many had economic activities before and many had small businesses, so we provide the assistance they need to start again from where they left. We also provide training or education”²⁵. Reintegration assistance may also come in the form of medical and psychosocial support.

²² Interview of the autor with Fukimo Nagano, Chief of Mission of the IOM at The Gambia. The Gambia, 6/11/18.

²³ *Ibid* Fukimo Nagano.

²⁴ *Ibid*. Attila Lajos.

²⁵ Interview of the author with Etienne Micallef, Program Manager of IOM. The Gambia, 6/11/18.

The initial target was to facilitate the voluntary return and reintegration of 1,500 persons over a period of three years. Two years after, it has been significantly exceeded. As of February 2019, more than 3,700 Gambians have voluntarily returned home since the EU-IOM Joint Initiative started in 2017. The majority came back from Libya. Almost two-thirds of all returnees, around 2,100, have already received their reintegration assistance. Close to 90% of assisted returnees have opted to establish their own microbusiness mainly in retail (39%), construction (31%) and transport (13%).

An estimated 4,000 Gambians are still stranded in Libya according to the IOM. Around 97% of the migrants are males, 90% are within the ages of 18 to 35, 75% are single, 86% have migrated for economic reasons and 98% have secondary education or lower.

The length of the support depends on the cases. Some start with IOM and continue with other projects available. But, as Etienne Micallef warns, for example, “it doesn’t make sense to bring psychologists from outside who don’t know the country, its culture and its languages. And there is also the problem of stigma in the community”²⁶.

To reduce the stigma faced by returnees is also part of the UN Peace Building Initiative, which supports communities of high return migration with consultations, psychosocial support, health education and medicine. But everyone agrees that to break the culture of the back way and the mentality associated to is difficult.

The Youth Empowerment Project (YEP)²⁷

The IOM is also part of the Youth Empowerment Project (YEP) intended to convince the youth to stay in The Gambia. It has an amount of 11 million euros funded by the European Union Trust Fund for Africa, established in 2015 to manage the flow of migrants from Africa into Europe.

The YEP is centered in helping young people gain entrepreneurial skills to create jobs and expand markets. It plans to support over 7.000 youths. The help consists in giving them technical or vocational training, in assisting them by the return or to encourage the creation of modern manufacturing jobs and services and to raise awareness about the importance of skills training. The goal is to invigorate the Gambian economy so that

²⁶ *Ibid.* Etienne Micallef.

²⁷ Available at: <https://www.yep.gm>

youths don't see a need to leave. "It's a small place, so you can make a real difference here, why not make it a success story?"²⁸, says Attila Lajos.

The government is setting up vocational schemes in sectors ranging from agriculture to information technology to implement this plan. Billboards can be seen across some places with a cheerful message: You can make it here! And they also launched the 'Tekkit Fii' (Make it in the Gambia) campaign, a government initiative supported by the European Union aimed at significantly scaling quality job and entrepreneurship opportunities available for young Gambians.

The International Trade Center is part of the UN and is central for the implementation of this Youth Empowerment Project. It provides opportunities for Gambians in general, not for returnees specifically. "We have more than 30 institutions to implement and we support them through technical assistance, financial support. There are lots of projects in different fields. We are working with companies focusing on specific sectors, such as agribusiness, tourism, information and communication technologies. We help existing businesses to become more productive and competitive to employ more people"²⁹, explains its country representative Raimund Moser.

The aim is to build up the economy and the productive capacities of the country, so that it moves away from being suppliers of commodities to create and retain values. This will help to create jobs and also quality to the products. "Our perspective is very market-led, we need to look what is needed and demanding in the market. We need to be clear where the demand is coming from, what we are selling whether it is national, regional or international and so we need to connect the skills and capacities to those market requirements"³⁰, Moser adds.

He also highlights that there might be problems for some returnees to go on training, because they are indebted after spending their money in the back way. "It is difficult for them to go for a training program for example for a year. Many people have children and they need to provide. So we have some programs that are short term, 2 or 3 months, where you can learn a skill with which you can make money very quickly"³¹. And he remarks that it is important that the investments are sustainable, inclusive and

²⁸ *Ibid.* Attila Lajos.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Raimund Moser.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Raimund Moser.

³¹ *Ibid.* Raimund Moser.

responsible with the culture and the environment. One aspect to have also in mind is that despite English is the official language of the country, many of the Gambians don't speak it well. This makes difficult for them to learn skills or to be trained to enter the business world.

Fairs and markets are organized for young entrepreneurs to show their products and to establish networking between them. Babucarr Kebbeh was responsible of one of these trade fairs at the Independence Stadium: "We try to bring them from the rural areas. We have this kind of space so that potential migrants decide to stay and establish their own business. But it is not enough, we need more to develop youth employment, youths need to get knowledge and training. Almost 33% of the population is not educated, have not gone to school, can't write or read. A lot has to be done"³².

Amifa, a young designer, says that she would like to go to Europe in order to buy some stuff and to learn, for business. But she has no intention of migrating because she thinks she can do everything in The Gambia. This is also the mindset of the young entrepreneurs at the fair. Muna Begalo has a beauty academy and a hairdresser's. She has never been in Europe and she would like to go to learn how to develop her business. But for now, she says, this would be impossible, as her business would collapse if she would go. "You can do it here if you have confidence and you believe in yourself. And, if you want to travel, do it in a good way and apply for a visa", she concludes.

All of them emphasize that the authorities have to create jobs and give youths capital for their businesses. The same opinions can be heard at the Good Market, which takes place normally the first Saturday of every month. Its director, Momodu Secka, explains that it is a platform for Gambian entrepreneurs to market their products: arts, crafts, and agriculture products. All made in The Gambia. This can create small businesses and employment.

³² Interview of the author with Babucarr Kebbeh. He is chief executive officer in Gambia Youth Chamber of Commerce. The Gambia, 3/11/18.

Returnees creating awareness

Libya's 2011 civil war opened a gateway for human smuggling to Europe, but a dangerous one. Tens of thousands of young Gambians have attempted the journey in recent years and many have died trying. Migrants have high probabilities of being subject to human trafficking, exploitation, violence or abuse. Therefore, they are more likely to return home after being exposed to these life-threatening events³³.

United Nations had denounced and condemned the unimaginable horror experienced by lots of Gambians who got stranded in Libyan prisons and detention centers. They are abused, tortured, raped, beaten or even sold as slaves or submitted to forced labor³⁴. If they are caught in Libya, they will have to pay a lot (more than 1.500 euros) to get free. And they can be caught two or three times.

When they return, many are in especially vulnerable economic and psychosocial conditions or are in large amounts of debt or have sold assets or land to fund their migration. And they come back empty-handed. Some are afraid of returning home. Maybe the community itself was the one who sent these boys on the back way. Now they consider them losers. According to IOM, 71% of them feel stressed upon return. Psychosocial and mental health issues are more prevalent among migrants compared to the general population³⁵.

Youths Against Irregular Migration (YAIM) and Gambia Returnees From The Backway Association (GRB) are working on the field creating awareness by telling their own terrible experiences and trying to convince the youths not to take the illegal route to Europe. They are doing it through different means and with different support. "There are no better ambassadors for this than the returnees themselves"³⁶, recognizes Etienne Micallef.

³³ Available at: <https://gambia.unfpa.org/en/topics/migration-2> Consulted 26/05/19.

³⁴ Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22393&LangID=E>. Consulted 1/06/19.

³⁵ *Ibid.* Available at: <https://gambia.unfpa.org/en/topics/migration-2>. Consulted 26/05/19.

³⁶ *Ibid.* Etienne Micallef.

Youths Against Irregular Migration (YAIM)³⁷

YAIM is one of the two main associations of returnees in The Gambia, the first country where returnees have taken such initiative. The idea was born 2017 by a group of them in the prison in Libya. The aim is to create awareness so that other youths don't go through their terrible experience. "In the prison we were more than 200 Gambians. You had there thousands of prisoners of many nationalities. And we said: let us share what we have experienced. We know we can only have the support we want if we come together and our voices will be stronger if we come together"³⁸, explains Bai Mustapha Sallah, Secretary General of YAIM.

It receives funds from the German Embassy and is heralded by some as the best hope for deterring migration. But they complaint that most of their members are not benefitting from the reintegration program and are frustrated, because they feel nobody cares about them and they are undergoing trauma. They are alive after surviving hell, they have lost friends who have been shot, beaten to death before their eyes or have died from disease.

Mustapha Sallah was repatriated in April 2017. He soon begun building this organization to warn of the dangers and advocate for migrants' rights. His dream of a new life in Germany ended in Libya. He spent around 2,000 euro for the failed trip and was detained in Tripoli for four months. "The day the police arrested us, after removing us from our houses, they burnt everything. Some were still hiding so they got burned," he recalls. "Others were shot because they ran trying to escape. Inside the prison, they tortured us, they beat us"³⁹.

His story is different to others. In March 2016, Gambia resumed diplomatic ties with China and cut them with former ally Taiwan. Sallah was in Nigeria to process his visa for a scholarship in Taiwan. "The Taiwanese said they will not give us any visa. Me and 20 other students ended up getting rejected," he says. He had spent the majority of a loan from his sister and decided to take the route to Europe. "This was never my intention when I arrived in Nigeria," he continues, "but I didn't have anything to hold in

³⁷ Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/yaimgambia/>

³⁸ Interview of the author with Bai Mustapha Sallah, Secretary General of YAIM. The Gambia, 4/11/18.

³⁹ *Ibid.* Bai Mustapha Sallah.

The Gambia because I was not working. I wanted to study computer sciences. I had all my documents with me. I knew I would be an irregular migrant in Europe but I know my potential, I knew that if I could make it to Germany, I could make my studies. I wanted to study and after come back. I know we have to make it here for the future. If all the youths are going, who will be here?"⁴⁰

Mustapha was in a deportation camp, not in a prison where they asked for money. "But they mistreated us, they tortured us badly, they didn't give us food, we starved. There was no toilet there, we didn't take bath, and the food was not good. We were sick. Arabs can kill you any time, they won't hesitate to do it, and they don't value black at any level. I decided to come back"⁴¹. As many others, he had seen the risks in the news but thought it was to discourage him and others. "Even when you are in the journey and you know it is risky, you still will go because you have the belief and the faith that you will be safe, you will be the lucky one"⁴².

And then there is the family and the society. They will stigmatize the youths when they are unskilled workers. And if they have younger brothers who are working, even the family will discriminate them. The returnees also explain that if their brother or sister is in Europe sending money, they won't be considered because they are not providing anything. The family, especially their mothers, will push them to go and look for a better life.

Mustapha complains of lack of funds. During their campaigns, the so-called caravans, they take their messages to markets, schools, villages and communities along The Gambia. They gather with the heads of the villages, the members of Parliament, the elders, the youths, the women and share their experiences and talk about the opportunities to do it in The Gambia, especially in the agricultural sector. They started in the rural areas because most of the young potential migrants are from those areas. They do dramas, a road show and show also a documentary about what happens in the backway.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Bai Mustapha Sallah.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Bai Mustapha Sallah.

⁴² *Ibid.* Bai Mustapha Sallah,

“There are many people who don’t believe it and some say that we couldn’t make it and that is why we are trying to discourage them but we are many and we explain our stories and what happened to us, not what we listened”, says Mustapha, “during our caravans, people say they are only convinced because we lived it and we tell them. They didn’t believe it, like me before I went. But now through us they believe it”⁴³. The German Embassy in Banjul has sponsored their youth caravans.

Returnees also speak in radio programs and in social media. “We need help, support, we have people who are injured. We are the right people to work with because we make it very clear: to make it to Libya is very hard, very expensive and more risky because the soldiers are everywhere in the desert”, warns Mustapha for whom the back way is nothing anymore: “Never again!”⁴⁴ But, as others, he would like to go to study and to work, only if there is a job with regular migration.

They say that a change in the mindsets of many Gambians is needed, because Europe has been idealized for so long. YAIM hopes that their efforts will make a difference in reducing migration from The Gambia.

Gambia Returnees From Backway Association (GRB)⁴⁵

Like YAIM, GRB was founded in a Libyan detention center and it focuses too on helping migrants to make it back into society by reducing the stigma associated with returning. They spread their message through tea ritual sessions, known as ‘attaya’. They put in action the “attaya caravans”. Through music, film and entertainment they are able to start a dialogue on irregular migration, including its root causes, the risks and the solutions. The campaign, called TekkiFii, was nationwide and lasted a week. In it YEP, EU and other initiatives and artists, influencers and the media participated.

GRB wants to provide agricultural training to returnees and use the land given to them by a local government to set up a farm run by returned migrants. If this project is successful, they would like to set up farms across the nation. “There are 30 people in the association supported and financed by IOM. It is to create awareness not to take the backway route. We also have to talk with the parents to actually support their children. If

⁴³ *Ibid.* Bai Mustapha Sallah.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Bai Mustapha Sallah

⁴⁵ Available at: <http://www.returneesfrombackway.org/>

they are to migrate let them do it in a regular manner. Migration affects not only the family and the one who goes, it also affects the country in its development”⁴⁶, explains Lamin Fadera, coordinator of GRB.

Alagie Camara, the chairman of the association, and Mamima Jallow, a member of it, say that the support is coming from international organizations not from the government. They are not indebted because they paid the journey from the money they had before. Paradoxically, they went to support their families and now their families are supporting them.

Alagie recounts that he was totally discouraged when he decided to leave for greener pasture. His experience in Libya was terrible: “I was tortured every day, even with electric shocks, some applied it in our genital organs. They forced us to sleep, they shot to the wall and you had to go down, they beat us badly, they came drunk and beat us. The Arabs didn’t care because we are black”⁴⁷. He remembers also that there were lots of traffickers and that he didn’t know whom to trust. “I didn’t think it would be like that. My friends were in Italy and they didn’t tell me the truth. If they would give me one million dollars, I won’t take this back way another time. I was lucky but I could have died”⁴⁸. He is sure now that he wants to stay in The Gambia and have a business and go to Europe for visiting.

Mamima thinks that they can’t come back and sit down: “People are listening to us because they know we have gone through it. Most of us didn’t want to take the back way. The conditions forced me to leave. I lost the job, opened a small business but the taxes were a burden. I was married and had a kid. I had to care of my family. Therefore I went. I was caught in Libya and was in prison. I was severely beaten. They look at us as animals, as monkeys. They said: I have monkeys here. How much do you want, 4, 5? Here they are. When I was in Libya, my other kid was born”. He assures that he feels ashamed after coming with nothing. “Even my enemy, I don’t like him to go through this journey”⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ Interview of the autor with Lamin Fadera, coordinator of GRB. He himself is not a returnee. The Gambia, 2/11/18.

⁴⁷ Interview of the author with Alagie Camara, Chairman of GRB and a returnee. The Gambia, 2/11/18.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Alagie Camara.

⁴⁹ Interview of the author with Mamami Jallow. The Gambia, 2/11/18.

Amie Chan, who went to the back way in 2015, was in Libya two years and three times in prison. She had to pay to get free and her family had to send the money. A militia detained her. In total, she spent more than 3.500 euros. Her story is very similar to the others. “I was going to school but I didn’t complete it because of my family situation. There was no work here. My family didn’t even know when I went. In the prison there was no food; they punish us seriously. They also shot me, the Arab people, and I was injured and went to hospital for three weeks in Sabha. They removed the bullet but even now sometimes I have pain. I won’t try it again. I want now to go to school again”⁵⁰. Alagie adds that like Amie he couldn’t complete his school because his father couldn’t pay the fees. Therefore he decided to leave.

Conclusions

The number of Gambians trying to reach Europe in an irregular way has gone down in recent times. More than 3,200 Gambians crossed the Mediterranean in 2018, fewer than half the 7,600 who made that journey in 2017, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Nevertheless there is no reliable data of the number of departures and also on transit because between ECOWAS countries they can travel visa free.

The route has become too difficult, too dangerous. Some have begun to use a new way, up through Morocco to Spain or to the Canary Islands, the same used by the first wave of Gambian migrants in the 1990’s. Others are plotting alternative ways out: a student visa, perhaps a European fiancée or maybe a relative already in Europe could sponsor the trip.

As Ambassador Lajos says, a new approach needs to be coming in. What has been done or is being done has to be reviewed from the ground. The EU should not impose anything. It should be a partnership listening to each other and better understanding each other, the relationship should be a mutual and benefiting one. The resources have to come to the people directly and it should be avoided that it ends in corrupted hands.

⁵⁰ Interview of the author with Amie Chan. The Gambia, 4/11/18.

“I truly believe that if EU doesn’t open up more possibilities for legal migration, again we are missing the point”, says Attila Lajos. As there is no EU embassy in The Gambia to submit the visa request, people have to travel to Dakar. This is of course expensive and they have to go there at least twice. “This is unsustainable. We have to make sure we treat them as partners”, insists Ambassador Lajos.

The policy of making it difficult for young Africans to go to Europe makes them curious. They want to go to know. “Make it easy for them to go. If they know they can come back, they will come back and forth”, says Ismaela Ceesay.

In The Gambia there is a great need of factories, so that they can offer job opportunities even to under educated people, simple workers. Europe can do a lot in this field. Also agriculture needs to be developed and the products should be elaborated in The Gambia so that the added value remains in the country.

Media have to make awareness and to give the right information, in the countries of origin but also in Europe. A counternarrative is needed. Attention has to be put in why people are going. The reality of the people who have made it in the country has not been portrayed. These success stories have to be told by the Gambians themselves. They can also inspire other Gambians.

“I am optimistic. I am working with young Gambians and for them and I have seen a lot of innovations, a lot of new products, a lot of new initiatives coming up”, says Raimund Moser. But more and more is needed, like a sort of economic revolution.

The Gambia government should come out with policies that provide good employment for their people. People want to live a decent life in dignity. Also the help and return of the Gambians in the diaspora have to be looked for. They should be ready to contribute for the development of the country.

Will all this new approach dampen young people’s enthusiasm to emigrate? Experts caution that not necessarily. Almost everywhere, they point out, making poor people more prosperous has broadened their horizons, made them more mobile and led to more people leaving, not less. It may take more than a generation to have the opposite effect as studies have shown⁵¹.

⁵¹ Available at: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2018/1126/EU-tests-idea-in-Gambia-Would-more-opportunity-at-home-mean-fewer-migrants>. Consulted 6/06/19.

Any case, the local and international organizations are taking an important step by focusing on the improvement of The Gambia and discouraging people from embarking on a journey that is often unsafe and sometimes fatal. “I do believe there is a good chance to make an impact here. If we jointly, government, civil society, can’t fix the problem here in such a small country, where else can we fix the problem?”⁵², asks Ambassador Lajos aloud.

Pilar Requena del Río
Journalist of TVE
Professor of International Relations

⁵² *Ibid.* Attila Lajos.