Migration Profile

THE GAMBIA

A. Executive Summary

The Gambia, the smallest country within Africa, is located in the Western part of the continent and is surrounded by Senegal and the Atlantic Ocean. It is longitudinally crossed by the Gambia River. Its geographic location has drawn international trade, conflicts, and conquests throughout history, making it mainly a transit and an emigration country. Nevertheless, immigrants and refugees fleeing from conflict and political instability in neighbouring countries, especially Senegal, have settled in this area.

The Gambia's economy is mainly based on agricultural products and livestock for domestic consumption, which 75% of the population depends on. The state has been facing also strong economic and social challenges, due to poor agricultural production, volatile oil and commodity prices, external debt, irregular migration, environmental degradation, low tourism attractiveness, weak educational and health-care structures, high rates of labour informality and unemployment[i]. This makes it mainly an emigration country, with considerable problems of loss of skilled young people that travel to Europe or other regions looking for better opportunities. The country also lacks structures and resources to reintegrate returnees, and this is a main concern for its current migration management.

The Gambia is among the 15 countries less developed in the world. In 2020 its GDP was 1.86 billion[ii]. In 2018 the state had a growth annual rate of 7.8%; however, in 2020 it had a 0.2% decrease, because of the sanitary and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic[iii]. Foreign Direct Investment varies greatly from year to year: in 2017 it suffered a 508.93% decrease, but it mostly recovered in 2018 with a 505.22% increase[iv]. In addition, in 2019 the annual GDP lost a 2.1%, and its inflation rate in 2020 was 5.9%[v]. Its Human Development Index is 0.496, being ranked 172 out of 189 countries[vi].

B. Country Profile

I. Basic Information

The Gambia is the smallest country in Africa, with a surface area of 11,300 sq. km[vii] and 2,416,664 inhabitants[viii]. Banjul is the capital and the county's largest metropolitan area, together with Serekunda and Brikama. Surrounded by Senegal and the Atlantic Ocean and longitudinally crossed by the Gambia River, the country is divided into five administrative regions.

Its official language is English, but there are other languages being used such as Mandinka, Wolof and Fula[ix]. 99% of the population are African ethnics, and the Mandinka is the most common group, followed by the Fula, Wolof, Jola, Serahule, and the Krio people[x].

Islam (especially Sunni) is the main religion, practised by 90% of the population[xi]. Christianity is attested at 9%, while the remaining 1% follows traditional creeds. There is a good coexistence among different religions, and both Muslims and Christians syncretise their faith with indigenous beliefs.

II. International and Internal Migrants

The Gambia is mainly an emigrant and a transit country, due to its peculiar geographic location, surrounded by Senegal, and to its low economic and educational structures. The state stands as the second largest diaspora per capita in Europe and the ninth global economy more dependent on immigrant remittances[xii]. Furthermore, it is an important entry point for irregular migrants arriving from Sub-Saharan Africa and going to Europe[xiii].

Internal migration in The Gambia mainly occurs from rural areas into the cities of Kanifing and Brikama, with a significant portion of them coming from Kerewan and Mansa Konko[xiv]. There are also many migrants moving from Brikama to other cities, like Kanifing[xv]. The main factors are changes in the family status, employment and education. The number of male internal migrants is higher (69%) than the female counterpart (31%). Regarding their occupation, most of them are self-employed (48%) or employed (33%). They are mostly involved in the business industry and petty trading[xvi].

Even though The Gambia is mainly a transit and emigrant country, it also hosts a considerable number of asylum seekers fleeing from conflicts such as the Casamance, or the Sierra Leone and Liberia civil wars, and immigrants from West-African countries. According to the Population Division of United Nations, in 2019 there were in The Gambia 215,406 international immigrants[xvii], approximately 9.8% of its total population[xviii]. They mainly come from Senegal, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, and Mauritania[xix]. According to the 2014 UN data available, there were 53.2% women and 47.8% men[xx]. Most immigrants work as services and sales workers, but other occupations include crafts and related trade workers. A high percentage (17.3%) works in the informal sector, and only 3.4% of the total offers corresponds to skilled jobs[xxi]. According to IOM, most of the immigrants in 2017 were in urban areas (68%). Indeed, Kanifing and Brikama host two-thirds of the immigrant population. Kerewan and Basse also have a considerable number of immigrants in comparison with other regions[xxii].

Regarding Gambian forced returnees, in 2016 there were 2,645 coming back from the EU[xxiii]. Nevertheless, according to the Ministry of Interior, there were only 150 (5.67%) Gambians deported. In 2019, the percentage of returned Gambians out of the total returnees orders continued to be low (11%), mainly due to delays in the identification processes and documents delivery[xxiv]. Permitting more deportations from the EU is perceived as a betrayal by Gambian migrants who do not want to return[xxv]. On the other hand, between 2015 and 2017, 930 voluntary returnees were assisted by IOM to come back to The Gambia, and 83% of them arrived from Niger. Since 2017, IOM has also provided emergency assistance to 480 voluntary humanitarian returnees from Libya[xxvi].

However, both forced and voluntary returnees face considerable problems with their integration and labour opportunities in the Gambian fragile labour market. There are few effective training and skills development structures in the country and high rates of unemployment and informal labour[xxvii]. Moreover, forced returnees usually have debts with the members of the origin community due to their "failed" migration project[xxviii].

In The Gambia there is a high rate of irregular migration which hinders the state control capacity[xxix]. On their journey to The Gambia, migrants and refugees face severe problems such as human trafficking or smuggling. The ones that finally reach the country also encounter other important integration concerns related to food insecurity, poor health, unemployment, and insufficient housing[xxx].

III. Emigration and Skilled Migration

Gambian emigration is a largely economic phenomenon and is closely related to environmental factors (i.e. the desertification process severely affecting agriculture, the main productive sector in the country). Other important emigration drivers are political instability, high unemployment (especially among the youth), and limited life opportunities[xxxi].

In 2019, The Gambia had 118,483 emigrants (5.05% of the total population). Emigration was mainly male (65.81%) and the age group mostly involved was the 20-24 years old[xxxii]. The main destination countries in 2019 were the United States (21.11%), Spain (15.05%), Italy (12.29%), Germany, and the United Kingdom.

Most emigrants are low/middle-skilled; however, in recent years, the number of highly educated people has increased by almost 40%[xxxiii]. In the receiving countries, Gambians are mainly employed in medium-skilled jobs (62.1%). There is an equal distribution between low-skilled (19.5%) and high-skilled occupations (18.5%)[xxxiv]. Over-qualification is a common problem among Gambian emigrants: 57% of those with tertiary education are working in low and medium-skilled occupations[xxxv].

In addition to these migration flows, non-registered movements among ECOWAS member states must be also taken into consideration, being a free movement area[xxxvi].

IV. Forced Migrants (internally displaced, asylum seekers and refugees, climate displaced people)

According to the 2021 UNHCR data, The Gambia registered 4,643 asylum seekers, of whom 4,429 were recognised as refugees, and 214 were seeking asylum. 4,056 came from Senegal, 162 from the Ivory Coast, 105 from Sierra Leone, and 63 from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)[xxxvii]. The refugee gender is equally distributed: 2,262 female and 2,121 male, and mostly being included in the 18-59 age group[xxxviii]. Regarding religion, nationals from Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Sierra Leone are mostly Muslim, while those from the DRC are Christian.

Since the 1990s, many people from Sierra Leone and Liberia have fled the war and sought protection in The Gambia. Senegal has had a low-intensity conflict since the 1980s and a large part of Senegalese refugees came from the Casamance region. Since 2017, an increase of people arriving from the DRC has also been observed in The Gambia[xxxix].

Senegalese refugees, mainly from the Casamance region, live along the Senegal-Gambia border where people have cultural similarities and common livelihood strategies, making coexistence much easier. Most Sierra Leone and Liberian refugees, instead, live in urban areas of the country, such as Banjul, Serekunda, and other cities[xl].

The Gambia has a solid legal framework for people who look for protection. In 2008, the Gambia Refugee Commission was established to coordinate refugee affairs in the country. In its definition of a refugee, the Refugee Act recognises the specific problems for refugees in Africa. It also provides '*prima facie*' recognition to people who may belong to a particular group or nationality, as well as the possibility of obtaining refugee status when another family member has already been recognised as a refugee[xli]. This recognition gives refugees the right to be involved in the labour market, freedom of movement and access to social services[xlii].

However, although the Gambian government allows refugees to live and work in the country, there is some inconsistency in this regard. As for the labour market, there are technical barriers, and refugees and employers are not duly informed on their rights. In addition, refugees need a "foreigners work permission" to be able to be officially employed. Also, health and education regulations are subject to different interpretations, which makes it difficult for refugees to know what the real coverage of their needs is. Refugees currently pay a local tax to have access to health services[xliii].

Moreover, integration for refugees in rural areas remains a challenge, due to food insecurity, poor health, and inadequate housing.

V. Victims of Human Trafficking

The Gambia is tier 2 country in the 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report of United States Department of State[xliv]. It has carried out significant efforts in eliminating trafficking, but it does not fully meet the minimum standards yet. In 2020, the state identified 18 victims, 11 Nigerian women and girls exploited in sex trafficking within the country, and 7 Gambian women exploited in domestic servitude in the Middle East[xlv]. In addition, NGOs reported 42 Gambian women being exploited in domestic services in Kuwait, Lebanon and Oman. Considering the underrepresentation of victims, the country has recently adopted a new referral mechanism (NRM) to enhance their identification and protection.

Furthermore, the lack of protection measures in the Gambian national labour law makes domestic workers vulnerable to human trafficking. They are also exposed to trafficking while migrating abroad by informal recruitment agencies, through social and family networks or tourism agencies. These organisations use fraudulent contracts and charge excessive recruitment fees. Foreign labour recruiters are neither regularised nor penalised for fraudulent recruitment by the State[xlvi].

Institutional training and resources for law enforcement and judicial officials remained severely inadequate. This low law enforcement's capacity worsened during the pandemic: their units were smaller and there were high rates of underrepresentation of sex trafficking and child sex tourism[xlvii].

Nevertheless, the state continued making efforts to provide victim protection. In September 2020, the National Agency Against Trafficking in Persons (NAATIP) trained law enforcement,

prosecutors, and judges on trafficking investigations and prosecutions. In 2020 the government allocated 3.6 million dalasi ($69,230) to NAATIP, implementing the 2016-2020 anti-trafficking action plan[xlviii]. It also increased judicial officials' salaries to limit turnover and operated a short-term shelter for trafficking victims, abandoned children, elderly, and victims of domestic violence. The shelter had an 80-person capacity and offered basic health and counselling services. However, it is worth mentioning that psycho-social, food and medical assistance was given mostly in the capital, leaving rural areas completely unattended.

Regarding law enforcement efforts, The Gambia carried out prosecutions of 2 defendants and followed up with 3 previous prosecutions. However, as required by law, the courts released all of them on bail[xlix]. One of the suspects hid, and no extradition request has been issued yet. There were no traffickers convicted in the last four years. The government did not have a formal witness protection policy, and victims were reluctant to cooperate with police investigations, since they feared reprisals from their traffickers. Furthermore, the state made some prevention efforts such as awareness campaigns. The ministry of education cooperated with teachers at Quranic schools to educate students on trafficking and prevented forced begging, by providing monthly food and cash transfers to 17 schools[l].

VI. National Legal Framework

In 2020, The Gambia launched its first 2020-2030 National Migration Policy (NMP), which provides a legal framework for migration management, coordination, and establishment of responsibilities of stakeholders[li]. It has been implemented by the National Coordination Mechanism for Migration (NCM) and coordinated by the Ministry of Interior in cooperation with IOM in The Gambia. It works in line with the 2018-2021 National Development Plan (NDP)[lii], addresses the challenges of irregular migration and offers new opportunities for regular migration channels[liii]. Moreover, it includes strategies responding to climate change impact on migration.

Regarding refugees, the state passed the Refugee Bill in 2008[liv], covering rights and basic services to refugees and establishing the Gambia Commission for Refugees. Human trafficking is banned under the 2007 Trafficking in Persons Act[lv].

The Gambia ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Refugee Protocol, but maintains reservations on its clauses providing exemptions for provisional measures, the right to work, social security, labour protection and administrative assistance for refugees. It has also signed the 1969 Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.

In 1980, The Gambia signed the 1969 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. It also ratified in 2003 the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime[lvi], and the Palermo Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons[lvii].

Furthermore, the state is signatory since 2014 to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons[lviii] and the Convention on the Reduction of Stateless 1961[lix]. In 2015, ECOWAS Member States adopted the Abidjan declaration on the eradication of statelessness.

Banjul hosted in 2017 the second regional conference, where the organisation adopted a regional plan for the eradication of statelessness in West Africa[lx].

VII. Main Actors

The State

In the field of migration, the Minister of Interior is the state actor in charge of coordination and policy implementation in The Gambia. Furthermore, the Gambia Immigration Department deals with migration visas, work permits, immigrants ID cards, passports issuances and residency documentation for expatriates[lxi]. Together with the National Police they coordinate the responsibilities for security and border control[lxii].

The Gambia Commission for Refugees, under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior, oversees policy coordination and management of refugees in the country. It mainly applies refugee status, receives and sensitises refugees and asylum seekers on their legal rights and obligations, issues identification documentation and registers data.

International Organisations

The main international actors in the country are the International Organisation for Migration, the United Nations, and the European Union. IOM coordinated along with the Gambian Ministry of Interior the National Migration Plan[lxiii]. In 2017, it launched the Migrant Protection and Reintegration Programme, together with the EU, in order to strengthen migration governance and sustainable reintegration of returning migrants. It aims to support 1,500 migrants reintegrate, to provide specialised assistance for vulnerable migrants, to raise awareness on safe migration options and to support national and local authorities[lxiv].

In 2015, the EU established the Trust Fund for Africa, in order to handle the migrant flow to Europe. As part of the Fund, the Youth Empowerment Programme (YEP) offers technical and vocational training to young people, supports returnees, and raises awareness about the importance of skills training[lxv].

The Gambia is one of the founding states of ECOWAS (1975) and member of the African Union since 2001, both playing a key role in establishing peace in the country. Moreover, the United Nations has agencies in Banjul through the UNDP, the World Food Programme, the FAO, UNICEF, UNFPA, and UNHCR. The Gambia is also the headquarters of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights of the African Union, as well as a Commonwealth member.

NGOs and Other organisations:

UNICEF collaborates with the government to provide services to all children in the country, working to ensure that they survive, thrive, and are protected from violence and discrimination. To reach more vulnerable communities and achieve greater impact they have implemented the Ñsa Kenno ("we can do it") model which focuses on community participation as an integral part of fostering change[lxvi].

In recent times, many people who left the country have returned to The Gambia. Many of these returnees, especially young people, have denounced the dangers Gambians face when

they arrive in Libya, including the high likelihood of trafficking, exploitation, violence and abuse. Associations such as Youths against Irregular Migration (YAIM) and Gambia Returnees from the Backway Association (GRB) have been set up to raise awareness among the local population regarding the high risks involved when taking the irregular route to Europe (Requena, 2019)[lxvii].

The Catholic Church

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is a Christian charitable agency operating in The Gambia, whose areas of intervention are urban and rural capacity building, agricultural development, micro-finance, health and nutrition, malaria control, adult literacy and numeracy programmes, and AIDS/HIV advisor[lxviii]. The CRS' Action for the Protection and Integration of Migrants in the (West) Africa (APIMA) program, in particular, ensures safe migration for a dignified life in West Africa and targets youth, including returnees, migrants in transit, as well as community members of five countries of origin: The Gambia, Ghana, Mali, Niger, and Senegal. For returnees in particular, CRS provides trauma awareness, psychosocial support and resilience training.

Among the Catholic actors proactively working in The Gambia, there is the Caritas Catholic Development Office (CaDO) established in 2001 within the Catholic Diocese of Banjul. The organisation, which consists of one diocese and 22 parishes, is responsible for coordinating its economic, social and development work that seeks to achieve a more humane and just society.

CaDO's main areas of intervention are HIV and AIDS Care and Support, Primary Health Care, Malaria Prevention, Parish Capacity Building, Water and Sanitation, Agriculture/Horticulture, Fisheries, Emergency and Relief, Peace Building and Income Generating Activities. It also builds capacity within communities, especially on behalf of marginalised and poor women, youth and children, while working for the reintegration of Gambian returnees from the initial stages of their return. Caritas Gambia also helps them with medical and legal assistance, education or technical training, employment, businesses and developing entrepreneurship.

CaDO is also implementing projects in collaboration with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Gambia, Hands on Care, the National AIDS Secretariat (NAS), ActionAid International the Gambia (AAITG), government ministries and departments, and international and local organisations to assist poor and marginalised people in order to lead full and productive lives[lxix].

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