

**CIVIL SOCIETY INPUT TO EU-AFRICA  
COOPERATION ON MIGRATION:**

# **THE CASE OF THE GAMBIA**

■ **Author**

**Gibril Faal**

London School of Economics (LSE)

**ECRE WORKING PAPER 12**

**2020**



**ecre**

European Council  
on Refugees and Exiles

ECRE Working Papers present research and analysis on asylum and migration. Their purpose is to stimulate debate by showcasing emerging ideas. Working Papers are commissioned by ECRE; the views they contain are those of their authors and do not necessarily represent ECRE's positions.

## 1. THE GAMBIA: SMALL COUNTRY, BIG MIGRATION

The Gambia is the smallest country on the African mainland. 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 over 1.8 million, and the United Nations Population Fund 'State of the World Population' puts it at 2.4 million in 2020. The population is young, with 76% aged 24 or younger, and a national median age of 21.8 years. Gambia is amongst the most densely populated countries in Africa at 177 people per sq. km, with a high population growth rate of about 3%. Urban concentration is high at 62%, growing at an annual rate of 4%.<sup>1</sup>

Migration data confirms that Gambia has been a country of destination for migrants from the West African sub region for decades. In the past 20 years, it also became a significant country of origin for migrants and refugees travelling to Europe and North America. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) estimated the Gambian population in 2019 to be at over 2 million, of which 215,406 were non-Gambian migrants<sup>2</sup>, constituting over 10% of the population. Research commissioned in 2018 by the Directorate General of Senegalese Abroad (DGSE) claimed 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.<sup>3</sup>

The main estimates of the global Gambian diaspora population are provided by three main sources. UN DESA estimated 118,485 in 2019, of which 71,987 or 61% are in Europe. A Gambian economist<sup>4</sup> puts the number at 140,000. The Government of The Gambia stated in its National Development Plan (NDP 2018-21) that the diaspora population can be as high as 200,000, taking into account undocumented irregular migrants and the multigenerational diaspora.<sup>5</sup>

Four of the top five host countries for Gambian migrants and refugees are in Europe.<sup>6</sup> As of June 2020, there were 22,840 Gambians in Italy, 19,849 in Spain and 15,535 in Germany.<sup>7</sup> The UK Office of National Statistics estimated that there are 20,000 Gambians in the UK, but a recent study<sup>8</sup> calculated that there are 36,279 Gambia-born migrants living in the UK in 2020. UN DESA data from 2019 indicates that 8,653 Gambians live in the Nordic countries.

Based on data from national statistical authorities and the United Nations, it is safe to state that over 100,000 Gambian migrants and refugees live in Europe, constituting at least 60% of the global Gambian diaspora. The number of Gambians living in the European Union (EU), excluding the United Kingdom, is still approximately 65,000.

1 Central Intelligence Agency, The Gambia, available at: <https://bit.ly/2JGRyWN>; The Gambia Bureau of Statistics, available at: <https://www.gbosdata.org/>; United Nations Population Fund, 'State of World Population 2020', available at: <https://bit.ly/3g3vWQw>.

2 UN DESA International Migrant Stock, UN Database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2019, 2019, available at: <https://bit.ly/37ynyF6>; It should be noted that UN DESA data consistently underestimates the size of the Gambian diaspora population; full comparative analysis is given in monograph noted below (Faal, 2020).

3 Research by Prof. Abdoulaye Seck of Universite Chiekh Anta Diop, communicated to Prof. Gibril Faal in April 2018.

4 C.Kebbeh, 'A Statistical Portrait of Gambians Living Abroad', 2019, available at: <https://bit.ly/3mHGure>.

5 Gambia National Development Plan (NDP 2018-21), p.238, available at: <https://bit.ly/39G1paG>.

6 The highest number of Gambian migrants reside in the USA.

7 The Gambian diaspora population data as of June 2020 is from: Italian Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (Istat); Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE); German Federal Statistical Office (Destatis); and UK Office of National Statistics (ONS)

8 G. Faal, 'Estimating Diaspora Populations: Case Study of Gambians in the United Kingdom', GK Partners, London (monograph completed July 2020, to be published in 2021).

## 2. ANALYSIS OF COOPERATION BETWEEN THE EU AND THE GAMBIA ON ASYLUM AND MIGRATION

### 1) Dictatorship in The Gambia and Migration to Europe

The Gambia is a former British colony which attained independence on 18 February 1965. In the decade after independence the country gained a reputation for peace, stability and democracy. On 31 July 1981, there was an attempted *coup d'état* which led to violent unrest and 500 deaths. In the aftermath, for the first time in its history, Gambian citizens registered as refugees in Europe. However, the number was very small, less than 30 people and based mainly in Sweden.

On 22 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. On 11 November 1994, the *coup* leaders had started killing suspected opponents within the army, and the year 1995 saw a draconian onslaught by the junta, leading to the murder of the civilian Finance Minister. In 1996, the military dictator Yahya Jammeh transformed his junta into a political party and the dictatorship continued for another 20 years, characterised by murders, disappearances, detentions, venal corruption and gross maladministration. This created an unprecedented number of Gambian refugees, and intensified economic and general outward migration.<sup>9</sup>

On 1 December 2016, a coalition of opposition parties won the presidential elections. Despite conceding initially, Yahya Jammeh later rejected the election results, provoking a tense political impasse and, as a result, displacement both internally and outside of the country.<sup>10</sup> The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) provided political support and military intervention for the democratically elected president to take office on 19 January 2017. Yahya Jammeh later fled to Equatorial Guinea as a refugee.

UN DESA data indicates that in 1995 there were 38,385 Gambian migrants globally, and that the number rose to 90,254 (135%) by 2015. Except for the mixed migration profile in the UK, migration of Gambians to Europe in the past 10 years is characterised by persons seeking asylum and arriving irregularly.

In recent years, Italy was the destination for the highest number of irregular African migrants crossing the Mediterranean. At its highest in 2016, of the 181,436 people who arrived by sea in Italy, 11,929 (6.6%) were Gambians. This was a 41% increase from 2015 where the number Gambians arriving by sea was 8,454. Of these arrivals in 2016, 27% were Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC), constituting a 150% increase from 2015.<sup>11</sup> From the top 10 nationalities arriving by sea in Italy in 2016, Gambia was fifth, behind Nigeria, Eritrea, Guinea and Cote D'Ivoire. In the same year, of the 7,490 sea arrivals to Spain, 863 (11.5%) were Gambians, the second largest nationality, behind Cote D'Ivoire and ahead of Guinea.<sup>12</sup> In Spain, 8% of the irregular migrants who arrived in 2016 were young Gambians, 92% of them aged 15 to 17, and the remaining aged 5 to 14 years. These statistics are staggering considering that Gambia is a small country with a population of just over 2 million.

Between 2014 and 2019, about 40,000 young Gambians, primarily men and boys, entered Europe by travelling through the 'back-way', across the Sahara and Mediterranean to Italy and Spain. Gambia entered the list of top 10 countries of irregular migrants to Europe in 2014 and the arrivals peaked in 2016 at 12,792, dropping to 7,600 in 2017 and to 4,500 in 2018. With a new anti-migration government in Italy in 2018, over 90% of the Gambian migrants that year arrived in Spain.<sup>13</sup> By 2019, Gambia was no longer in the top 10 countries of sea arrivals in Europe, but the journeys continue, with the horrendous incidences of destitution and deaths that occur along these perilous routes.

9 G.Faal, 'Notes on the Emergence of the Gambian Diaspora', 2018, GK Partners, London and Banjul, available at: <https://bit.ly/2L8nCE5>.

10 The dictator was threatening violent unrest and thousands fled to neighbouring Senegal and to rural Gambia.

11 FFM West Africa, 'Migration in The Gambia Country Profile 2017', p. 68, available at <https://bit.ly/2JMYfqE>

12 UNHCR, 'Refugees & Migrants Sea Arrivals in Europe', Monthly Data Update, UNHCR, Geneva, 2016.

13 See UNHCR data update reports on 'Refugees & Migrants Sea Arrivals in Europe.'

## 2) 2014-2016: Intransigence and Stalemate in EU-Gambia Relations

The European Union is a long term development partner and largest donor to The Gambia, providing support within the framework of the Cotonou Agreement, through the European Development Fund (EDF). It provided financial, technical and infrastructural support even during the dictatorship. The EU-Gambia Country Strategy and National Indicative Programme (2008-13), signed on 9 December 2007, committed €76 million for Infrastructure (46%); Governance (15%); Budget Support (29%); Capacity, Technical and Other (10%).<sup>14</sup>

As the human rights situation in The Gambia deteriorated and the erratic behaviour of the dictator, Yahya Jammeh, increased, a diplomatic stalemate arose between The Gambia and the EU. In November 2014, the government unilaterally ended dialogue with the EU, and in December 2014, the EU withheld €13 million of the grant package, and €33 million earmarked for 2015-16.<sup>15</sup> In March 2015, the Africa-Europe Diaspora Development Platform (ADEPT) started dialogue and cooperation with the EU Chargée d’Affaires in The Gambia, including a meeting in Banjul on 19 March 2015.<sup>16</sup> The focus of the meeting was to explore civil society and diaspora actions to reduce the high numbers of young Gambian migrants embarking on irregular journeys, in the context of the stalemate between the EU and the government. The cooperation led to ADEPT inviting and sponsoring government and civil society delegates recommended by the EU delegation in Gambia, to attend the Second Diaspora Development Dialogue (DDD2) in Valletta, Malta on 27-30 May 2015. The EU delegation assisted in the issuance of a Schengen visa to the delegate representing ‘Operation No Back Way to Europe (ONBWE)’, a young Gambian returnee, who had previously been deported from Europe. The topic of DDD2 was ‘From Irregularity to Stability: Strategic and Viable Actions to Prevent Irregular and Dysfunctional Migration’.

The delegate from ONBWE participated as a speaker at DDD2, but the government delegates (two Permanent Secretaries) were stopped from attending a few days before DDD2 by the Office of the President. The ONBWE delegate claimed that he faced harassment upon his return to Gambia, and later fled to France as a refugee. On Friday, 5 June 2015, less than one week after DDD2, the government expelled the EU Chargée d’Affaires from The Gambia, with 72 hours notice. This decision followed the first political dialogue meeting between the EU and the government, since November 2014.<sup>17</sup> It marked the lowest ebb in EU-Gambia relations. A new EU-Gambia Country Strategy and National Indicative Programme (2015-16) remained unsigned until January 2016. The EU re-committed €33 million for Agriculture (85 %); Transport (9 %); Capacity, Technical and Other (6 %).<sup>18</sup>

In June 2016, the EU approved €11 million EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) funding to the International Trade Centre (ITC), to run a Youth Empowerment Project (YEP) in The Gambia<sup>19</sup>, to address root causes of irregular migration. Direct funding to the ITC was a practical way of addressing urgent asylum and migration matters in the face of continued policy uncertainty. On the part of the Gambian government, there was no coherent policy or programme to address the spike in perilous irregular migration journeys, or engagement with the EU. All decisions were made by the dictator, based on his whims and caprices, and government officials took instructions and cues from him.

## 3) 2017-18: Post-Dictatorship Gambia and Priorities on Migration and Asylum

When the new government took office in The Gambia in January 2017, it began the process of formulating a transitional development plan. This culminated in the Gambia National Development Plan (NDP 2018-21). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) produced a Migration Profile report for The Gambia, but the main policy and framework for dealing with Gambian migrants and refugees was set out in the Gambian Diaspora Strategy (GDS), which was fully incorporated in the NDP.<sup>20</sup> The government

14 European Commission, Country Strategy Paper and National Indicative Programme (2008-2013), 2007, available at: <https://bit.ly/3llizUJ>

15 Reuters, Middle East funds Gambia as EU cuts aid over human rights concerns, 10 December 2014, available at: <https://reut.rs/3g9JcDI>.

16 The author of this report was the founding director of ADEPT and he led the dialogue with the EU delegation in The Gambia; ADEPT was and is still co-financed by the EU.

17 European Parliament, Parliamentary questions, 16 September 2015, available at: <https://bit.ly/3g8Y197>.

18 The Republic of The Gambia and the European Union, ‘National Indicative Programme for the 11<sup>th</sup> European Development Fund, January 2016, available at <https://bit.ly/2VE4jV8>.

19 EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, Youth Empowerment Project, available at: <https://bit.ly/39FNq4A>.

20 The author of this report drafted the GDS as incorporated in the NDP as part of the ‘Migration and Sustainable Development in The Gambia (MSDG) technical cooperation project, co-financed by the Swiss government available at: <https://bit.ly/3lBDC7G>.

acknowledged that “As a proportion of its population, The Gambia has the highest percentage of irregular migrants using the Saharan-Mediterranean (back-way) route to Europe.... The end of dictatorship will reduce the rate of irregular migration, but it will not stop it. Working with international partners, the government will provide appropriate protection and support to Gambians abroad, especially distressed and vulnerable migrants, and unaccompanied and separated children. When necessary, the government will facilitate their safe and voluntary return home, in line with human rights provisions.”<sup>21</sup>

In Chapter 3 of the NDP (page 106) on ‘Critical Enablers’ of Gambian development, the third (of the seven enablers) is ‘Enhancing the role of the Gambian Diaspora in national development.’ Chapter 7 of the NDP (pages 236-239) provides a policy and situational analysis on ‘Diaspora in Development.’ Pages 112-119 presented the specifics of the Gambian Diaspora Strategy (GDS), with programme actions and four-year output targets. Annex 4A of the NDP identified 10 ‘Flagships/Priority Projects of the NDP Strategic Priorities’, relating to the Critical Enablers. The third flagship/priority is: ‘Migration and Sustainable Development in The Gambia (MSDG) Project’, and the fourth flagship/priority is: ‘Strengthening the management and governance of migration and the sustainable reintegration of returning migrants in The Gambia.’<sup>22</sup>

The 14 target-based programme commitments of the Gambian government policy and strategy for its migrants included: Setting up a Gambia Diaspora Directorate; Preventing Irregular and Dysfunctional Migration; Global Migration Dialogues and Bilateral Engagement; and Ethical Recruitment and Circular Migration. From the NDP, it could be deduced that the strategic priorities relating to migration and asylum were:

- 1. Managing Irregular Migration:** Ensuring the welfare of Gambian migrants and asylum seekers abroad, especially the irregular ‘back-way’ migrants in Africa and Europe;
- 2. Maintaining Stability:** Maintaining and improving the fragile peace, security and social stability in the country which could be jeopardised by mass deportations and return of large numbers of disaffected young men;
- 3. Development Cooperation:** Capitalising on the goodwill and cooperation of development partners, including Germany and Italy which hosted the highest numbers of Gambian asylum seekers;
- 4. Investment and Jobs:** Creating employment opportunities for young people to offer alternatives to migration; and engage with the diaspora to expand and enhance investments, entrepreneurship and job creation.

#### **4) 2017-2020: Return to Democracy and EU-Gambia Cooperation**

For the EU, its migration and asylum policy regarding Gambia is anchored on the five domains of the Joint Valletta Action Plan (JVAP)<sup>23</sup> on: addressing the root causes of irregular migration; legal migration pathways; protection and asylum; preventing and fighting irregular migration; and return, re-admission and reintegration. Additionally, the EU supports Gambia’s transition to democracy, particularly through the €30 million funding of the military ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG), and the Security Sector Reform (SSR) process.<sup>24</sup> These complement the traditional development cooperation framework of the Cotonou Agreement.

In August 2018, Gambia became the fourteenth West African country to sign the region-to-region Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the EU. The EU remains the biggest donor to the Gambia government, and the funding packages are good indicators of policy priorities. In 2017-20, the EU provided €365 million

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.115.

<sup>22</sup> See the final version of ‘The Gambia National Development Plan (2018-2021), Jan 2018, available at: <https://bit.ly/3IBDc7G>.

<sup>23</sup> Valletta Summit, 11-12 November 2015, Action Plan, available at: <https://bit.ly/3gqkYcF>.

<sup>24</sup> From February 2017 to March 2020, the EU provided €30,292,120 to ECOWAS, for the ECOMIG military presence; in November 2020, the Gambian president stated that he has negotiated further EU funding for ECOMIG, this may cost up to €10 million a year from 2020 onwards: Gambia.com, ‘E.U Attila Lajos Ends His Stay In Gall Moon, Bids Farewell To Barrow,’ available at: <https://bit.ly/3g5u0Ho>; Freedom Newspaper, Gambia: EU is still funding ECOMIG, ECOMIG is also helping to train our soldiers-barrow, 5 November 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2VBmfja>.

directly to the Gambia government, and €38.95 million from EUTF to development agencies operating in Gambia.

Within three weeks of the new Gambian president being sworn in, the EU was able to finalise arrangements regarding its June 2016 EUTF grant of €11 million to ITC for a Youth Empowerment Project. The EC Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development became the first senior development partner to visit post-dictatorship Gambia.<sup>25</sup> On 9 February 2017, he announced a €225 million support package, of which €75 million was for immediate and shorter term interventions (including YEP), and €150 million was for medium and longer-term actions.<sup>26</sup> The new President's first international trip was to France and the EU on 14-17 March 2017. The EU also facilitated the 'International Conference for The Gambia' (Donor's Meeting) on 22 May 2018 in Brussels, at which pledges were made for €1.45 billion to finance the Gambia National Development Plan (NDP 2018-21). At that meeting, the EU committed a further €140 million, in addition to the €225 million.<sup>27</sup>

The Gambia is also one of the 14 African countries included in the €140 million 'EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration' approved in December 2016 and launched in 2017. In addition to EUTF funds, the initiative is co-funded by Germany (€48 million) and Italy (€22 million).<sup>28</sup> In 2017/18, the EU also provided a further €40 million to UN agencies in Gambia for projects including: €13 million to UNICEF for 'Building Resilience through Social Transfers for Nutrition Security in the Gambia (BReST)'; €11.5 million to

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Food Programme and the United Nations Children's Fund for 'Post-Crisis Response to Food and Nutrition Insecurity in The Gambia'; and €13 million to FAO for 'Agriculture for Economic Growth'.<sup>29</sup>

In November 2018, the EU agreed to provide two-year budget support and three-year technical assistance of €55 million, focusing on improving governance, public financial management and service delivery.<sup>30</sup> As a response to the COVID 19 pandemic, the EU provided additional budget support of €25 million in October 2020.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. IMPACT OF EU PRIORITIES ON ASYLUM AND MIGRATION IN THE GAMBIA

Using the five domains of the JVAP as the EU priorities on asylum and migration in relation to The Gambia, an impact review reveals mixed results, ranging from moderate success to negligible impact. In the period 2016 to 2020, EU action in The Gambia focused on two of the JVAP domains, namely return and re-admission, and root causes of irregular migration.

#### 1) Return, Re-Admission and Reintegration

- 1. Return from Libya and Niger:** On 10 March 2017, less than two months after the new government took office, the EU-funded IOM programme chartered a flight and repatriated 170 stranded and distressed Gambian migrants from Libya back home. Since then, over 5,000 Gambian migrants have taken up the voluntary return option, mainly from Libya and Niger.<sup>32</sup> Despite significant unease

25 EC Commissioner Neven Mimica visited Gambia on 8-9 Feb 2017, and UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson visited on 14-15 Feb 2017

26 European Commission, EU opening a new chapter of relations with The Gambia, 9 February 2017, available at: <https://bit.ly/3gaGHkq>.

27 International Conference for The Gambia, Brussels 22nd May, 2018 Communique by the co-Chairs, available at: <https://bit.ly/3qqaSsi>; IMF (2018) IMF The Gambia Country Report No. 18/197, Washington, June 2018

28 Delegation of the European Union to The Gambia, 'EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration: one year on', 19 December 2017, available at: <https://bit.ly/3oiCloH>.

29 Delegation of the European Union to The Gambia, '8 March 2018 Press Release: How the European Union supports women in The Gambia,' 13 March 2018, available at: <https://bit.ly/33Hijlr>.

30 Delegation of the European Union to The Gambia, 'The European Union gives € 55 million for Budget Support and Good Governance in The Gambia', 16 November 2018, available at: <https://bit.ly/3olOONH>.

31 European Commission, 'Team Europe: The European Union disburses €25 million to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus crisis in The Gambia,' 19 October 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3mGM9Od>.

32 IOM, The Gambia, available at: <https://www.iom.int/countries/gambia>

among refugees in 2017,<sup>33</sup> the scheme seems to be operating reasonably well. Return and re-admission from Libya and Niger can be considered successful. The reintegration of returnees is only marginally successful. There is anecdotal evidence of returnees staying in urban areas, away from their original villages, and some embarking on migration again.

2. **Deportations from Europe:** There is ongoing tension between The Gambia and the EU and European countries regarding deportations, return and readmission. High levels of youth employment mean that returnees cannot acquire local jobs. Thus, the government is reluctant to facilitate mass returns, which would exacerbate economic problems in the country and risk unrest and instability. The government does not want to be seen as being complicit in deportation of Gambians by European countries. The EU has publicly expressed frustration at the deficiency of cooperation from the government. Germany has started deporting small numbers of Gambians, even during the COVID 19 pandemic.<sup>34</sup> As the tension between the Gambian and European governments continues regarding deportations, the EU impact on this issue is minimal.
3. **Unresolved Asylum Cases:** Gambian irregular migrants to Spain are generally placed on schemes relating to regularisation and settlement. As a result, the number of Gambian refugees and asylum seekers in Spain are relatively small. More than 30,000 Gambian migrants arrived to Italy by sea in 2015-20. Thousands of them then travelled to Germany to seek asylum or other forms of settlement. Many are rejected and return to Italy. The number of Gambians granted refugee status in Italy has increased immensely, from 4,919 in 2015 to 12,968 in 2019. The number of asylum seekers rose from 5,073 in 2015 to a peak of 10,570 in 2017, and has fallen to a low of 701 in 2019. During the same time, the number of Gambians granted refugee status in Germany has been relatively low: 172 in 2015, rising to 1,032 in 2019. The number of asylum seekers had remained high: 5,024 in 2015, rising to a peak of 9,773 in 2016, and 4,940 in 2019.<sup>35</sup> In July 2020, the Gambian Minister of Foreign Affairs informed parliament that 4,837 Gambians in Germany were at risk of being deported.<sup>36</sup> The government's stance remains that mass migrant returns and deportation will undermine its transition from dictatorship. The impact of the EU in respect of addressing unresolved Gambian asylum cases in Europe is minimal.

## 2) Root Causes of Irregular Migration

1. **Youth Entrepreneurship:** EU-Gambia cooperation has led to a vibrant national-wide programme of youth entrepreneurship support, creating widespread awareness and interest in business as an alternative to job-seeking. The 2019 EUTF monitoring report indicated that the funded projects created 2,051 jobs.<sup>37</sup> Analytical evidence has not yet emerged to indicate that the entrepreneurial programmes have actually prevented irregular migration. However, the boost to youth entrepreneurship is evidence of a degree of EU success in addressing root causes of irregular migration.
2. **Government and Budget Support:** The enormous financial contributions of the EU for conflict prevention, budget support, state-building and emergency COVID 19 response has had a major impact in maintaining security and economic stability in the country. These contributions are consistent with JVAP priorities on how to address the root causes of irregular migration, and the EU has been reasonably successful in helping the government prevent the types of financial and security problems that can cause spikes in irregular journeys.
3. **Bilateral Support:** In December 2017, the President of Germany was the first (and only) European Head of State to visit Gambia. Since then, the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) has set up operations in The Gambia, working on EUTF and other projects, including a €10 million KfW project supporting stability and sustainable development through job creation,

---

33 F.Zanker and J. Altrogge, *The Politics of Migration Governance in The Gambia*, Arnold Bergstraesser Institut (ABI), Freiburg, 2017.

34 The Standard, 'German authorities indicate that the 22 deportees are convicted criminals,' 30 November 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2JOM5h2>.

35 UNHCR, Refugee Data Finder, available at: <https://bit.ly/3mD91hy>.

36 The Point, 'Over 4000 Gambian migrants face deportation from German,' 3 July 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2JHZ5Vt>.

37 Altai Consulting, EUTF Monitoring and Learning System, June 2020, p.86 available at: <https://bit.ly/3qyVZUX>.

especially for young people.<sup>38</sup> This positively reinforces European contributions to Gambian economic stability, livelihood enhancement, and it also expands financing options available to entrepreneurs.

- 4. Absence of Civil Society Support:** With about €400 million of direct and indirect EU programme and project financing in The Gambia, funding of Gambian-led civil society is marginal. The EU funding goes to the government and international organisations. In 2017, the EU provided €1 million through a 'call for proposals' to fund two Gambian civil society organisations and one NGO. No Gambian diaspora has accessed EU funding. All the funding through EUTF went to international organisations and the development agencies of the EU Member States. One of the JVAP priorities on addressing root causes of irregular migration was to 'promote diaspora engagement in countries of origin.' In May 2018, the EU indicated possible support for a diaspora project, but in September 2019, it decided to "*realign our EUTF focus towards.....facilitating the reintegration of returnees.*"<sup>39</sup> In The Gambia, the EU had minimal impact on the issue of diaspora engagement.

### 3) Protection and Asylum

**Migrants in Germany and Italy:** The Gambia does not have a resident ambassador in Germany or in Italy, the two countries in Europe with the highest number of Gambian irregular migrants. These countries also do not have reciprocal ambassadors resident in The Gambia. There seem to be reluctance to address the fact on the ground that the issue of irregular Gambian migrants in Europe is not a purely legalistic and procedural matter. In the first place, many of the migrants, including children, were not political victims of the dictator, but victims of the desperate economic situation he created. In The Gambia, irregular migrants and socio-economic development cannot be separated. In Italy in the past seven years, 13,000 young Gambians were granted refugee status and there have been no mass deportations to The Gambia. In Germany, by 2019, approximately 1,000 Gambians were granted asylum, but there has been no mass deportations for the nearly 5,000 Gambians at risk. This overall scenario can be deemed to be positive in the context of protection and asylum. However, the uncertainty about legal status, anxiety about deportation, and state of limbo that these migrants live in has a range of negative effects on the lives and livelihoods of thousands of unsettled Gambian migrants.

### 4) Addressing Legal Migration Pathways

**Absence of Legal Pathways:** There are no programmes, schemes and actions for legal migratory pathways for young or semi-skilled Gambians to travel and/or work in Europe. The Gambia is not participating in any structured form of temporary, circular or educational migration schemes with EU countries. Even for middle class Gambians, getting visas to European countries remains a big challenge. None of the Schengen countries have embassies in Gambia, thus all visa applications are processed in Senegal, resulting in additional costs. The EU impact on legal pathways regarding The Gambia is minimal.

### 5) Preventing and Fighting Irregular Migration

**Continuance of Irregular Migration:** It was inevitable that the number of 'back-way' Gambian migration through the Sahara and Mediterranean was going to decrease in the past four years, as anticipated in the Gambia National Development Plan (2018-21). The factors that caused the reduction included: end of the dictatorship in The Gambia; European anti-trafficking measures; formation of a government in Italy by an anti-migration alliance; conflict and migrant brutalisation in Libya; arrivals of returnees and deportees to The Gambia, etc. However, a sizeable proportion of young Gambians still believe that they cannot make a good life for themselves and their families in The Gambia, and are prepared to invest funds and risk their lives to take perilous irregular

<sup>38</sup> See the 'Gambia Pilot Program' available at: <https://bit.ly/3okIKWX>.

<sup>39</sup> The diaspora project was to be part of the MSDG project, managed by the author of this report; the decision to realign focus to reintegration of returnees was communicated to him, see, <https://bit.ly/2JI02qv>.



journeys to attempt to enter Europe. In December 2019, over 60 Gambians died when their boat capsized off the coast of Mauritania.<sup>40</sup> Yet every week, there are rumours of boats departing from The Gambia or Senegal, with Gambian migrants. Infrequently, law enforcement authorities disrupt these journeys. Mostly, the authorities have no knowledge of the actions of the trafficking networks. The Gambia has not broken the lure or machinery of irregular migration to Europe, and the EU's impact on this issue in Gambia is minimal.

#### 4. ABILITY OF THE EU TO AFFECT ASYLUM AND MIGRATION POLICY

Altrogge and Zanker (2019) noted that “Whilst migration is an important societal phenomenon, this does not translate into a priority in state policy design. This is, for one, expressed in the little attention that migration and especially irregular migration receives in the National Development Plan. It is also displayed in the dragged process of designing and launching the National Migration Policy. The notable exception is the diaspora policy, which is well developed in the NDP.”<sup>41</sup> This gap in migration policy in The Gambia creates an opportunity for the EU and other stakeholders to influence its formulation. There are also a number of current factors in Europe, The Gambia and globally that can enable the EU to have a positive effect on Gambian asylum and migration policy.

- 1. New Pact on Migration:** In September 2020, the EU launched its ‘New Pact on Migration and Asylum’. Although the EU’s priorities may not exactly coincide with those of Gambia, the EU proposes a new approach to engaging with external partners, based on “*joint assessment of the interests of both the EU and its partner countries.....taking into account the specific situation of each partner country.*”<sup>42</sup> If this approach is pursued genuinely and diligently, then the EU may succeed in having a more substantive effect on Gambian migration policy.
- 2. Global Compact on Migration:** In October 2020, the UN Secretary General published his report on the Global Compact on Migration (GCM), highlighting the importance of collaborations and GCM national implementation plans. Through IOM, The Gambia is one of the countries that has already set up a national GCM network,<sup>43</sup> working in collaboration with the National Coordination Mechanism for Migration. IOM is also instrumental in supporting the government to produce a comprehensive national migration policy. Through collaboration with these mechanisms, the EU can increase its engagement and effect on Gambian migration and asylum policy.
- 3. National Policy Reviews:** The Gambia National Development Plan (NDP), which incorporates the Gambian Diaspora Strategy, was for a four-year period ending in 2021. It is likely that aspects of the NDP will be reviewed before the presidential elections are to be held in December 2021. Both NDP and EUTF monitoring reviews will highlight implementation and impact gaps over the past four years. Such information, together with awareness of governmental priorities, will provide the EU with an opportunity to engage in policy formulation as a major development partner.
- 4. Partnership and Coherence:** The most important factor that affects the EU’s ability to influence and affect Gambian asylum policy and practice is not the volume of its financial support to the country, but its recognition and validation of Gambian national priorities. In the interest of transparency, it is encouraging that the government is clear that mass deportations of Gambian migrants from Europe fundamentally undermine Gambian peace, stability and development. It is, therefore, important for the EU to maintain policy coherence in The Gambia, such that its support of state-building is not undermined by counterproductive demands and conditionalities.<sup>44</sup>

40 Infomigrants, ‘Gambian town mourns migrant deaths at sea off Mauritania,’ 6 December 2019, available at: <https://bit.ly/3mI9FKE>.

41 Altrogge, J. and F. Zanker (2019), ‘The Political Economy of Migration Governance in The Gambia’, Arnold Bergstraesser Institute (ABI), Freiburg

42 European Commission, ‘New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Questions and Answers,’ 23 September 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3qnOK1Q>.

43 United Nations Network on Migration, Terms of Reference for the UN Migration Network in The Gambia, available at: <https://bit.ly/3mFwsgG>.

44 On 28 October 2020, the Gambian Ambassador to the EU, speaking at an EPC webinar ‘Return and readmission after the New Pact’ raised concern about the seeming conditionality linking legal migration pathways to performance on return and readmission. See, European Policy Centre, Return and readmission after the New Pact, 21 October 2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/37y9bR5>.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE EU-GAMBIA RELATIONS

Based on the above review and analysis, the following recommendations are made to enhance the policy and practice of EU-Gambia cooperation on asylum and migration.

- 1. Implementation of Diaspora Strategy:** The role of the diaspora in ending the dictatorship in The Gambia and supporting families and communities was so important that the Gambia National Development Plan (NDP 2018-21) recognised it as the Eighth Region of the country. The work to implement the Gambian Diaspora Strategy (GDS) is ongoing, and there is need for EU support for some of the 14 commitments of the GDS.<sup>45</sup>
- 2. Support to Civil Society:** The EU has commitments to support civil society organisations to enhance the beneficial work they do, and to provide citizens with diverse options of service providers. This is particularly important in The Gambia, where the high levels of illiteracy and informality require the type of nimbleness, flexibility and engagement that civil society generally better provide in comparison to government and international organisations. Furthermore, beyond the delivery of programme and project outputs and outcomes, EU funding can leverage other macroeconomic and financial benefits. Gambian-led civil society and diaspora organisations create multiplier effects by spending high percentages of funds in the local economy, rather than retaining or repatriating funds to Europe through expatriate salaries and benefits.
- 3. Innovation in Regularisation:** Even for instances when migrants are eventually deported, the legal and administrative process may take years, and the financial cost is high. In many instances, the process takes longer than it would take a trainee to travel to Europe, undergo accredited training and return home. EU countries, especially Germany and Italy, can operate schemes to treat potential deportees as trainees, support them on structured courses with the commitment that they shall return home after completion. The migrants will communicate this to family and friends, and it will be known that they are studying, to return home after graduation. Additional development incentives can be added such as: linking e.g. trainees in Germany to German-funded programmes in The Gambia; financial support with return and reintegration costs; option to acquire visas in the future for visit, study or other purposes. This approach is another practical means of supporting The Gambia maintain peace and social stability, and help the government mitigate the huge risks associated with mass deportations. Skilled migrants with work-related experience returning home will be assets rather than liabilities to the country.
- 4. Innovations in Circular Migration:** EU-Gambia cooperation can lead to the design of Blue Card and other temporary and circular migration schemes for particular groups of Gambians at risk of being irregular migrants. New approaches to circular migration can be initiated and piloted in The Gambia, given the fact that it is a small country with a high risk of irregular migration. For example, six-12 month semi-skilled work in agriculture, social care or construction can be designed to target 'gap-year Gambian students' from deprived backgrounds. It can be restricted only to those who have been accepted for studies in tertiary institutions in The Gambia. During the gap-year between acceptance and enrolment, they can travel and work in the participating EU country. This will allow them to earn enough to fund their entire further studies in The Gambia, in addition to gaining work experience in an industrialised country, and the likelihood to getting visas in the future for general international travel. Features of such a scheme can restrict payments to nominal allowances during deployment in Europe, with the bulk of the income payable upon return in Gambia.
- 5. Innovations in Entrepreneurship:** Most of the entrepreneurship schemes supported by the EU in The Gambia are for self-employment or the creation of a handful of low level jobs. These will not have a transformative effect on the unemployment problem of the country, and it is unlikely to end irregular migration. The EU can support fast-growth social enterprises and responsible businesses which are likely to create 25 to 75 desirable jobs that pay high salaries. These may include social franchises or 'activist entrepreneurs' who open up new value-chains in sectors that create national resilience e.g. land and water management, renewable energy, infrastructure maintenance. These businesses can create the desirable jobs needed to break the lure of irregular migration.

---

<sup>45</sup> The author of this report is the programme director of the MSDG project which currently implements aspects of the GDS, co-financed by the Swiss government, and in partnership with the Gambia government.



**ecre**

European Council  
on Refugees and Exiles

**European Council on Refugees and Exiles**

Avenue des Arts 7/8

Brussels 1210

Belgium

T.+32 232 900 40

[ecre@ecre.org](mailto:ecre@ecre.org)

[www.ecre.org](http://www.ecre.org)