

#MMN Gambia Blog

Title of Blog- Gambia an irregular migration hotspot-challenges and risks

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Introduction

The Gambia is one of the migration hotspots along the West African coast and this trend continues to grow. It serves as an origin, transit and destinations country. Accordingly, The Gambia has enjoyed, and continues to enjoy the dividends that accrue from migration. But it has also suffered from the challenges migration poses to origin, transit and destination countries. This blog highlights on the increasing migration trends in The Gambia with special focus on challenges and risks. The country is one of the smallest in West Africa, with a population of about 2.3million. It has a very youthful population, with about 60% under the age of 25.ⁱ Majority of the population (70%) rely on rain-fed agriculture and cannot afford improved seeds and fertilizers. The percentage of people living on less than US\$1.25 a day remained unchanged from 2010 to 2015 – at around 48%. The Gambia has a low literacy rate, at 52% of the working age population, posing challenges for future transformation.ⁱⁱ



Source :NOVAFRICA Working Paper and UN News

Gambia Irregular Migration Hotspot

The Gambia is one of the countries in West Africa with very active migrant population. Between 2015-2020, the country recorded a net migration rate of -1.217 migrants per 1000 of its population.ⁱⁱⁱ Recent migration patterns and their underlying motives are carved along the new forces of globalization which are transforming economies all over the world. Deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and deepening poverty, political repression, especially under the former Gambian leader, Yahya Jahme are the leading drivers of emigration from the Gambia. Many Gambians emigrated in large numbers to seek political asylum in Europe under Jahme. In recent

times however, there has been a big push from the European Union (EU) member states to return failed asylum seekers back home to The Gambia.

As a country of origin, Gambian emigrants are mostly skilled workers, including doctors and nurses, and provide a significant amount of remittances. But there are also many youth with little or no formal education or training risking their lives on daily basis to reach Europe largely through irregular means. Between 2013 and 2017, about 38,500 Gambians left the country through irregular means.^{iv} The top receiving countries for Gambian emigrants are Spain, the US, Nigeria, Senegal, and the UK. Spain also hosts large numbers Gambia migrants because of its proximity and the availability of jobs in its underground economy. From January 2017 to March 2018, 8,681 Gambians were recorded as arriving in Europe by sea, the eighth largest nationality of the arrivals and comprised 4.7% of the total.^v In 2016, 12,792 Gambians arrived in Italy and Spain alone by sea.^{vi}

As a transit and destination country, The Gambia hosts large numbers of migrants from other coastal and Sahelian countries in West Africa whose dream is to reach Northern Africa and then to Europe. The country hosts large numbers of refugees from Senegal due to the Casamance conflict, and from Cote d'Ivoire. This has put more strain on the country as the refugees now compete with fewer jobs with the youth of the country.

Gambia has suffered negatively from the migration conundrum. First, the repatriation of Gambians in large numbers from Europe following a "best practices" agreement between president Adama Barrow's government and the EU has caused rift between Gambians and the government. By cooperating with the EU to return Gambian nationals, the government is risking its domestic legitimacy as many migrants and their families see the action as a betrayal by the government.

Second, the exodus of skilled workers from the Gambia and the resulting brain drain over the decades has deprived the country of the much-needed skills and expertise to develop the country, and to support in the current democratic transition efforts.

Third, the failure of returned migrants to succeed on their mission (or the perception of it) come with high levels of stigma and discrimination in the Gambian society. Many returned migrants are indebted to people they borrowed monies from to finance their travel outside. A study conducted by the IOM reveals that 55 per cent of returned migrants in The Gambia are in debt, with over half characterizing either the shame or burden of their indebtedness as a hindrance to their reintegration in their home communities (IOM 2021).^{vii}

From The Gambia to Europe: challenges and risks facing Gambian migrants

Gambian nationals face numerous challenges in their attempts at migrating from the country to Europe for various reasons. Most young men and women migrate through irregular means, exposing themselves to various risks during their journey. Some lose their lives either through the desert or in the Mediterranean. First, many Gambian nationals intending to reach Europe travel through Libya, where they transit and prepare for their onward journey to Europe. Like many other African migrants in Libya, migrants from The Gambia are arrested and put in detention facilities run by rogue Libyan militia groups with high levels of violence in these detention centers.



*Figure 1: Refugees and Migrants in a detention center in Libya.
Source: Overseas Development Institute*

There are reports of organ harvesting of migrants in some of these detention centers,^{viii} and Gambian migrants are not an exception. In the words of Luis R. Miranda, an award-winning journalist; “Many do not want them [African migrants] within European borders, but they do seem to want their organs”.

The second risk identified by the Migrant Project is adverse effects of the weather in the Sahara Desert, noting that the extreme heat and in the desert has led to loss of lives of hundreds of Gambia migrants attempting to get to Libya, and then to Europe every year. Oxfam International estimates that between 80,000 and 150,000 people crossed the desert in northeastern Niger on their way to Europe in 2015, with most of them being young, coming from Cameroon, Senegal, Gambia or Guinea.^{ix}

Third, migrants who escape the dangers in the Sahara Desert and in Libya would have to brace themselves for the even more perilous journey across the Mediterranean, of by rickety, dangerous and overcrowded boats. The first recorded boat accident in the Mediterranean which happened in January 2021 claimed the lives of 43 people, while 10 others were unaccounted for.^x



Figure 2: Migrants in distress as their boat sinks. Source: The Atlantic

In February 2021, more than 1,500 Europe-bound migrants were intercepted by Libyan Coast Guards in the Mediterranean and brought back to Libya.^{xi} In December 2019, about 62 Gambian migrants perished when their makeshift boat capsized off the coast of Mauritania.^{xii}

Fourth, migrants from the Gambia risk kidnapping along the route through the desert. Kidnappers often call the parents or families of their victims and

make demands of huge amounts of monies before the victims are released. A Teacher in Brikama town in The Gambia had to sell a plot of land, which was the only remaining family asset to set his brother free after his brother called him from Mali to say he would be killed by smugglers unless a ransom paid.

Conclusion

Migration in The Gambia, as in many other parts of the world is fueled by economic, socio-political, security and climate change vulnerabilities, amongst others. The deteriorating political situation in The Gambia under its former leader, Yahya Jammeh, and the accompanying economic and security challenges forced many young people, including professionals into exile. Indeed, the situation in The Gambia best illustrate the concept of 'mixed migration, which birthed huge populations of political and economic refugees largely in Europe. But also, in North America and other African countries. The contribution of migrant remittances to the economy of the Gambia has helped to sustain the country's economy over the years, measuring up to about 20% of its GDP between 2013 and 2015. The slow down in the global economy and the influx of large numbers of refugees from Africa and the Middle East in recent has forced the European Union to re-examine its migration policies, with a determination to keeping migrants out of its borders. The tightening of border controls and the repatriation of Gambians in large numbers has brought in its wake significant challenges to The Gambia. Returning migrants have added increased economic and political pressure on the country, threatening the modest gains in its democratic transition process. The government of Adama Barrow, with the support of the EU has intensified efforts at reintegrating returnees, but also putting in place programs to keep Gambians at home. There is a growing discourse around opportunities of 'making it in the Gambia', pushed by the governmental and externally funded projects reaching out to young Gambians. To realize this objective, the government needs to invest in modernizing agriculture, which employs about 70% of the population, to make it attractive to the youth. The donor community, especially the EU must support The Gambia with resources and technology to adapt to climate change, which has impacted negatively on agriculture in recent years. Finally, the government must diversify productivity and invest in the tourism sector to boost income and employment as a way of keeping the youth back home.

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This blog acknowledges funding from The Migrant Media Network: "*Engaging Diaspora and Potential Migrants on Safe Migration and Positive Alternatives*". The *views and opinions* expressed in this blog are those of the *author* only

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