

**GREENER PASTURES:  
MIGRATION  
DECISION MAKING  
AND JOURNEYS**

**THE GAMBIA**

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# PUBLISHER

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## 10 KEY FINDINGS:

- 1) Migration in the Gambia is highly driven by economic reasons, specifically poverty and unemployment
- 2) Supporting the family is the strongest motivation for migration among Gambian migrants
- 3) Friends who have migrated/ are migrating are both the main information source and force in the decision-making process
- 4) Money is the most important factor in enabling migrants to begin their journey, preparation time highly depends on how long it takes to obtain the required financial resources for the journey
- 5) Migration routes can be very dangerous and there is a high awareness of the potential risks, nevertheless Gambian nationals decide to take the journey
- 6) Gambian nationals who are planning to migrate try formal visa channels or at least learn about the visa process before they take the journey
- 7) The diaspora is very effective in shaping Gambian nationals' perspective on migration, presenting the life outside the Gambia, motivating their fellow nationals to migrate and shaping the selection of the destination country
- 8) Networks are the most important factor in selecting the destination country
- 9) Migration plans are not for long-term, return intention is very high
- 10) Female and male migrants face different challenges throughout and after the journey

## INTRODUCTION

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in 2019 there were an estimated 272 million international migrants globally. Economic reasons, such as a lack of economic opportunities and the expectation to find better livelihood opportunities elsewhere, contribute to the major push and pull factors causing migration (IOM, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Push factors are those that drive migrants out of their country, such as seeking to escape poverty<sup>2</sup>, while pull factors are those that attract migrants to a destination country. Migration can enable migrants to send remittances back home and thus meet their basic household needs which can be considered as an example of pull factors.

The Gambia is the country that has the largest remittances to GDP ratio in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank Group, 2018)<sup>3</sup> which is a result of its long history of a consistently high migration. As one of the smallest but most densely populated countries in Africa, with a population of 2.3 million<sup>4</sup>, the Gambia faces economic and developmental challenges linked to its undiversified economy, limited access to resources, lack of job creation and institutional problems<sup>5</sup>. Its small internal market size, lack of skill development opportunities and weak governance structure pose further economic challenges. It ranks 174 out of 189 countries in the 2018 Human Development Index which specifically looks at national achievements in health, education and income<sup>6</sup>. It also ranks 171 out of 186 countries with its GDP per capita 755\$ in International Monetary Fund's (IMF) GDP per capita ranking. The economy relies on agriculture, tourism and remittances. In order to improve the standards of living and gain better access to services and economic opportunities, many Gambian nationals, especially youth, have decided to migrate in recent years. Remittances are equivalent to 20 per cent of the country's GDP, which shows the significant role of migration in Gambian society<sup>7</sup>.

This report explores the economic drivers, societal dynamics and decision-making processes focusing on migration of Gambian nationals, drawing on the data collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) in the Gambia between 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> January 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/A%20Region%20on%20the%20Move%202018%20for%20preview.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=5734>

<sup>2</sup> <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/2535/582840PUB0ID231ration09780821384367.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/Migration%20and%20Development%20Brief%2030.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gbosdata.org/downloads-file/the-gambia-labour-force-survey-gfcs-2018>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gambia/overview>

<sup>6</sup> <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2018-update>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.iom.int/countries/gambia>

The report's findings can be used to inform migration policies, understand the needs of Gambian migrants and explore areas where further data collection and research might be required.



Source: IOM- DTM

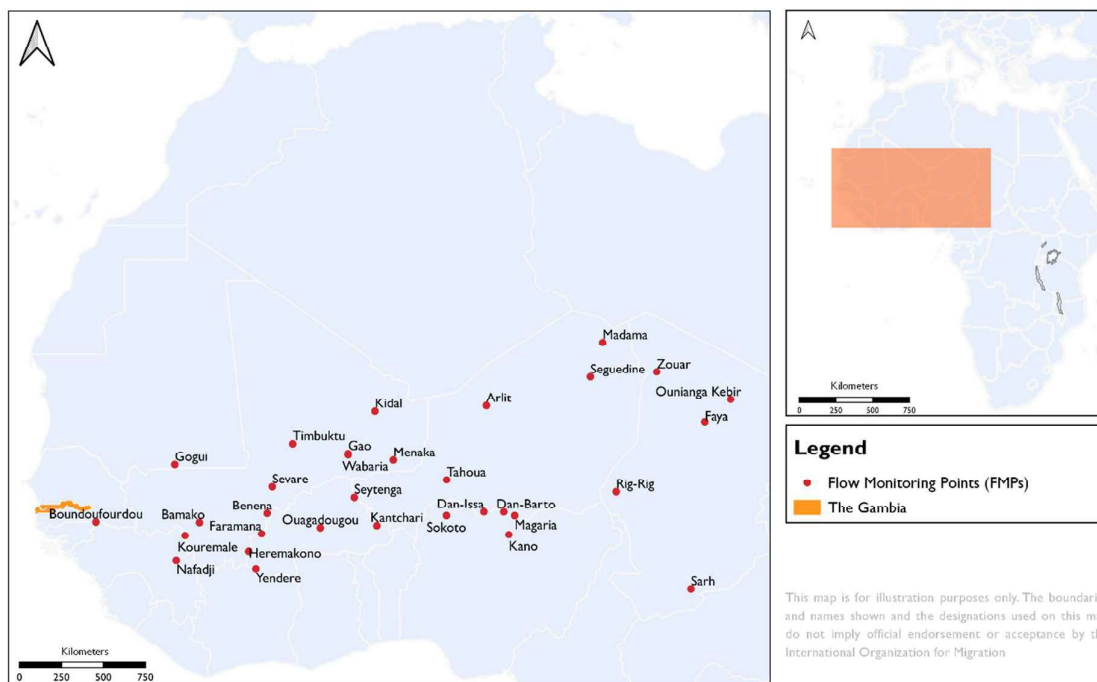
## BACKGROUND

According to The Gambia Labour Force Survey (2018)<sup>8</sup>, a majority of 61,515 migrants recorded in the last five years preceding the survey (62.6%) used “back-way” which is a term used to describe irregular means of migration. The results also show that most of the people who migrated by both regular and irregular means left the Gambia due to lack of job opportunities, this was followed by migrants leaving for education. Although number of unemployed people was higher in rural areas (69.4%) compared to urban areas (30.6%), a majority (68%) of irregular migrants were from urban areas. Moreover, data shows that more females were unemployed than males across all age groups. For the age group of 15-64 years, the unemployment rate was 35.2%, while the youth unemployment rate was 41.5%. Most of the youth who were employed, were working in the wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles and in the other service sectors.

In addition to the Labour Force Surveys, IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix's (DTM) data collected in the West and Central Africa region, and returnee data from the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrants' Protection and Reintegration provide an evidence base indicating the significance of the impact of economic factors on migration in the country and on the profiles of Gambian migrants. The data about Gambian nationals was collected at 24 Flow Monitoring Points (FMPs) in West and Central Africa, including Burkina

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gbosdata.org/downloads/gambia-labour-force-survey-29>

Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal. In total, 1,442 Gambians were surveyed from the beginning of 2018 to September 2019 at these FMPs. Under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrants' Protection and Reintegration, IOM The Gambia assisted the return of a total 5,019 beneficiaries between January 2017 and December 2019.



Source: IOM- DTM

According to DTM data, the profile of Gambian mobile populations demonstrates a low median age, high rates of unemployment or self-employment, and a predominance of male migrants, most of whom move for economic reasons:

	Median Age	Primary School	Secondary School	Unemployed	Self-employed	Female	Individuals migrating primarily for economic motivations
Gambia	25	40%	31%	47%	40%	12%	87%

## METHODOLOGY

IOM DTM aims to contribute to the understanding of differential needs and vulnerabilities of migrants. This report is intended to provide guidance to IOM and its partners while taking decisions and adopting operational approaches in their support to the most vulnerable Gambian migrants. The dataset used to produce this report is generated from focus group discussions (FGDs). Data collection was executed with gender balance in mind given the critical need to include the views of both female and male migrants to ensure that different perspectives and challenges were considered in the findings. Thirty-six male participants and seventeen female participants took part in this study. The methodology for this report draws on information collected and analysed by IOM The Gambia and DTM.

The focus groups shed light on the underlying mechanisms of the decision-making processes for economic migration with a specific focus on the main push factors, societal dynamics, diaspora relations and expectations.

## DTM

DTM is IOM's information management system. Composed of a variety of tools and processes designed to track and monitor displacement and migration, DTM regularly captures and processes multiple layers of data, and disseminates various information products that facilitate a better understanding of the evolving needs of displaced populations and migrants, be that on site or en route.

## DATA SOURCES

This study uses information from FGDs conducted in the Gambia with potential migrants, returnees and diaspora members who were visiting the Gambia during the period of assessment (1<sup>st</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> January 2020). The discussions with potential migrants and diaspora members were held in one city, namely Serrekunda, discussions with the returnees were in three different cities, Bara, Birkama and Soma which specifically host many returnees. There were both small and large groups depending on the target group and the location. In total 10 FGDs were held (4 groups with potential migrants, 5 groups with returnees and 1 group with the diaspora members). Each group consisted of three to nine participants and was moderated by a DTM team member. All participants were Gambian nationals. While six groups were composed of males, the other three groups consisted of female potential migrants and, separately, female returnees. One group of diaspora members comprised both female and male respondents. The participants were identified through convenience sampling, drawing upon the networks of IOM staff, partners and referrals by other study participants. The network of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) activities assisted with the identification of returnees, most of whom were unsuccessful in their attempt to reach Europe.

Convenience sampling brings some limitations such as under/over representation of the population and inability to generalize the results. For instance, as most returnees were identified through AVRR networks, the likelihood of interviewing returnees who were not successful in reaching to main intended destination country was high. Therefore, these returnees may not be completely representative of the total returnee population. Relying on referrals from staff, partners, other study participants may also have reduced the



pool of respondents to a specific social circle. However, despite the limitations, convenience sampling was pursued as it is time-efficient and simple to implement.

## TARGETED POPULATIONS

- 1) **Potential migrants:** Young Gambian nationals who live in the Gambia, have not attempted to migrate yet but are planning/ considering migrating. The participants were identified through the networks of IOM staff and partners. They were asked whether they have been considering migrating in the near future. In total 22 potential migrants (11 male, 11 female potential migrants) participated in the discussions. The average age was 26.
- 2) **Returnees:** Gambian nationals who have attempted to migrate/ migrated and returned to the Gambia in the last three years. In total 26 returnees (23 male, 3 female returnees) participated in the discussions. The average age was 25. Their average stay outside of the country was one year and eight months.
- 3) **Diaspora:** Young Gambian nationals who live in the United States of America or Europe.<sup>9</sup>In total, five diaspora members (2 male, 3 female diaspora members) from France, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Sweden, USA participated in the discussions. The average age was 27.

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<sup>9</sup> Diaspora definition: Migrants or descendants of migrants whose identity and sense of belonging, either real or symbolic, have been shaped by their migration experience and background. They maintain links with their homelands, and to each other, based on a shared sense of history, identity, or mutual experiences in the destination country [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml\\_34\\_glossary.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf)

## KEY FINDINGS

### KEY FINDING ONE

#### Migration is highly driven by economic reasons, specifically poverty and unemployment

The most cited reasons for migration were unemployment, lack of opportunities, especially for youth, and poverty. The Gambia does not suffer from conflict and thus is considered as a comparatively safe country compared to other countries in the region. Moreover, after 22 years under an authoritarian rule which had a limiting effect on the potential for investment, the Gambia is now governed by a democratically elected government in place since 2016. According to the participants, despite these positive conditions, the country has not been able to develop its economy. There were five points discussed in the FGDs which shed light on both macro and micro economic problems of the country the observations related to the Gambian economy. Observations in the subsequent section were made by the FDG participants unless another source is indicated.

- 1) **Lack of employment opportunities:** The Gambia has a population of 2.3 million with a high youth ratio<sup>10</sup>. Respondents reported that limited foreign direct investments, industry and trade developments can be listed as the biggest obstacles for job creation in the country. Although there are few opportunities in the formal labour market, employment opportunities are mainly limited to self-employment, daily work and petty trading. Lack of permanent contracts prevents long-term saving and investment planning. Moreover, investment in education and skills development is reduced as having skills does not necessarily translate to improved employment opportunities which would, in turn, pay their investment. Participants believe that more than 70 per cent of youth are unemployed. The latest Labor Force Survey reports the national unemployment rate at 35 per cent, while youth unemployment stands at 41.5 per cent. In addition, 56.8 per cent of the youth in the Gambia fall under the “Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) category<sup>11</sup>. This disparity between the estimate of the respondents and the estimate provided by the Labor Force Survey could be driven by the calculation methodology of the unemployment, participation of young participants in FGDs and how unemployment is perceived in the society. For instance, unemployment rate does not cover the jobless people who are not actively looking for a job. Moreover, part-time workers are also counted as employed. High levels of self-employment and presence of informal economy can also affect the statistics.
- 2) **Low income/purchasing power:** It was observed that having a job does not necessarily solve hardship and there thus remains a high propensity to consider migration among Gambian nationals. Some of the participants stated that they sometimes earn only US\$ 50 in one month of work. Living costs are reportedly very high in the Gambia. High inflation levels, volatility in the prices and low exchange rate of the currency diminish the purchasing power. The Gambian economy is highly dependent on imported goods<sup>12</sup>, which may explain the high price of even basic goods and price

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<sup>10</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=GM>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gbosdata.org/downloads/gambia-labour-force-survey-29>

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335912668\\_Relationship\\_between\\_Export\\_Imports\\_and\\_Economic\\_Growth\\_An\\_Export-led\\_Growth\\_Strategy\\_for\\_the\\_Gambia\\_Using\\_The\\_Granger\\_Causality\\_Test](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335912668_Relationship_between_Export_Imports_and_Economic_Growth_An_Export-led_Growth_Strategy_for_the_Gambia_Using_The_Granger_Causality_Test)

volatility driven by the exchange rate. Furthermore, this limits the supply of goods and services. Participants reported that the monthly income that would be sufficient for them not to consider irregular migration is between 10,000 – 20,000 Gambian Dalasi (GMD) (\$190-390).

- 3) **Lack of skills and matching problem:** Lack of skill development was another crucial, frequently mentioned, problem in the discussions. Tertiary education is not easily accessible, tuition fees are reportedly very expensive for most nationals which in turn causes low rates of enrolment. Participants indicated that people who have higher skills are less likely to migrate through irregular channels (referred to as “backway”). They may find jobs with more ease than someone with lower education levels and are then more likely to receive a visa and migrate through regular channels. They also may migrate for educational purposes like pursuing a Master’s degree in Europe or in the US or they may apply to jobs abroad. According to the participants, there are few available jobs. Barriers to skill development generate further difficulties for employers to match profiles with available jobs/ opportunities. Low-quality education, limited diversity of skills and disciplines taught in higher education, lack of equipment and expertise in the teaching of particularly technical skills were listed as the main underlying factors that shape the matching problem in the labour market. Gambian youth find that jobs in the country lack innovation and do not provide opportunities to develop skills further.
- 4) **No savings / debt:** The potential migrants and returnees who participated in the FGDs expressed their concerns about saving money due to the difficulty of covering the cost of living with existing salaries. High price levels and inflation were among the reasons expressed to explain this, along with the high level of debt some already hold. Specifically, the respondents voiced concern about their dependency on (mainly unofficial) loans to cover even their basic needs. A part of salaries is diverted to pay back debts from the previous month. Due to low salaries, people need to borrow from each other to cover expenses until they receive their next monthly salary. This creates a continuous debt cycle every month. Under the conditions of limited access to official financial channels such as bank credits, most of the debit transactions are carried out in the form of unofficial borrowing from relatives or friends. Lack of access to official loans given by banks is driven mostly by the collateral requirements and limited supply of credit. High interest rates can be also considered as an important barrier to access to the financial services.
- 5) **Lack of access to finance:** Self-employment is a very crucial source of income in the Gambia as there are few firms that have the financial resources to employ several employees. Moreover, FGD participants indicated that the majority of people prefer having their own business and working alone instead of forming cooperatives or being employed by someone. Participants mentioned that finding sufficient starting capital is very challenging as the banks require collaterals or guarantors.
- 6) **Lack of machines, processing tools:** Participants highlighted that another key challenge of the Gambian economy is the lack of intermediate goods and machines required to process goods. Therefore, raw materials available in the country are exported to be processed and imported back in the form of final goods. However, this missing part of the production process constitutes the most value-adding step. Participants reported that they cannot find the necessary tools and machines to develop and expand their business and process their products, in turn, they cannot enjoy the higher returns to their initial investments.

## KEY FINDING TWO

*“Things are very hard at home. I want to work and help my mother. I also have siblings at home who are still young and need help as well. I guess if the things continue like this, I must take the backway.”*

### Supporting the family is the strongest motivation

According to the participants, the most important reason for migration is contributing to the family budget. Extended family ties are very strong in the Gambian culture. The size of the extended family could reportedly reach up to more than 50 people. In all discussion groups, the main reason for migration was indicated to be “supporting the family”. Everyone felt the responsibility of contributing to the family budget and taking care of the family. Moreover, besides this perceived responsibility, participant responses indicate that there is an external pressure to be the provider of the family. Migration could also provide an opportunity to escape from this internal/external pressure. However, when it comes to the decision-making process, the majority of the participants reported that migrants do not inform their families prior to their journeys. According to the returnees, the main reasons for not notifying families were that given the high-risk awareness, families could try to prevent the person planning to migrate from taking the dangerous journey or would at least be highly worried. However, there are also cases where families openly support or even pressure their children to take the journey. They may even sell their properties and lands to cover the cost of the journey. According to the participants, families are more involved in the regular migration processes as their support might be needed to meet visa requirements.

Families which have not been informed before the onset of journey, tend to hear from their children and learn where they are when the latter run out of money along the journey and need to ask for additional financial assistance from their families. According to the participants, most of the migrants who take the Libya route to reach Europe run out of financial resources in either Mali or Niger as they have to make payments to people facilitating the journey and pay bribes at checkpoints.

## KEY FINDING THREE

Friends who have migrated/ are migrating are both the main information source and force in the decision-making process

*“I heard from my friends!”      “They are making money so I can make [it] too!”  
“All friends of mine migrated!”*

As reported by the participants, peer effect is strong in the decision-making process for economic migration in the Gambia. Friends can be impactful in the different stages of migration. First, they can influence the decision to migrate. Successful migrants share their experiences with friends back home, including through social media and other communication channels. Moreover, participants indicated that friends constitute the most important, trustable and accessible information channel for those considering to migrate. They share information and experience on the routes, job options in both transit and destination countries and information about accommodation facilities. Furthermore, they might support the potential migrants

financially by sending money, covering their costs during the journey or in the destination country. In the discussions with the returnees, the majority reported that they took the journey with some friends. Most of the returnees were introduced to the facilitators of the journey through social networks as well.

#### KEY FINDING FOUR

Money is the most important factor in enabling migrants to begin their journey, preparation time highly depends on how long it takes to reach the adequate financial level for the journey

According to the participants, there are a couple of steps needed to be taken before the journey, first and foremost to obtain the required financial resources to finance the journey. In the preparation period, they try to save a part of their income and receive support from relatives and friends both in the Gambia and in Europe for both regular and irregular channels. The cost of the journey is approximately known by most of Gambian nationals as they know at least one person who has migrated. For the irregular channels, reportedly between 40,000 to 60,000 Delasi is needed to start the journey and reach Libya (£800 - £1,200). The cost varies depending on the route and expenditures that would be incurred during the journey. For the regular route, visa cost changes depending on the country. Most of the participants believe that irregular migration could be cheaper than the official channels. The time for accumulating sufficient savings varies from one person to another.

After saving the required amount, the information collection process starts. As mentioned above potential irregular migrants collect information on the routes, transportation, accommodation, jobs and risks mostly from relatives and friends who have migrated before, as well as from drivers who may also facilitate the journeys and returnees in the community.

For those who intend to take an irregular channel, facilitators are contacted to arrange the journey. As mentioned in the discussions, the final step could be contacting Marabouts (religious leaders who specialise in luck, fortune-telling advice and support) for spiritual guidance.

For visa application, potential migrants first gather information, then collect the necessary documents and an application is made.

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#### KEY FINDING FIVE

Migration routes can be very dangerous and there is a high awareness of the potential risks, nevertheless Gambian nationals decide to take the journey

*"Everyone has a different destiny!" "Seeing people dying never stop[s] people!"*

Participants acknowledged that the journey creates many vulnerabilities that may lead to death. Hunger, thirst, sickness, exhaustion, accidents with unsafe vehicles, risk of being kidnapped, and trafficked, sexual abuse, detention centres, violence, lack of contact with the family and friends, losing personal documents to the security forces can be listed as the main risk factors. Participants mentioned that they had to spend long hours in packed vehicles under high temperatures especially in the desert, unable to take a shower, change their clothes, and sleep.

Returnees who participated in the focus group discussions elaborated on the cost of their journey and each step that they needed to make a payment. According to the participants, they needed to pay at least 10.000 CFA (USD\$ 17) in each checkpoint. When they did not agree to pay, they reported being beaten, tortured or electrocuted.

As a result of this, many reported spending all their savings at checkpoints covering Mali and Niger. This means that additional support is frequently needed in order to continue the journey beyond these points. At this point, migrants try to communicate with their parents and the other members of the extended families. Migrants who can receive monetary support from their families continue their journey while those who do not want to create this burden for their families try to find other ways of financing their onward journey. Some of the participants mentioned support (in the form of debt) coming from other migrants, or Gambian nationals living in the transit country. Participants reported that another way to continue is to rely on trafficking networks (particularly in Libya where numerous victims of trafficking have been reported) with people sold and forced to work to pay their debt for being “saved” from being killed, detained or deported.

All of the returnees who have been in Libya were kept in detention centres at some stage of their journey. The time that they spent in detention varies from two months to over one year. Participants reported that they endured inhumane conditions in the detention centres where they often slept with more than 100 people on the floors of the shelters in very unhygienic conditions. Those detained also reported that insufficient food was provided.

Male participants cited that they were working in day jobs, for example in construction and gardening, and female participants reported working in domestic work and home care for a short period while they were transiting through Libya. Many earn only enough money to survive.

The primary channel for collecting information on the journey was reported as asking friends and relatives who took the same journey, some of whom are living in Europe. The second channel is contacting agents/facilitators. Potential migrants also communicate with returnees. It was emphasised that returnees conveying their negative experiences to try and discourage potential migrants usually does not change the potential migrant's intentions. Participants believe that everyone has a different destiny and there are always examples of people who arrived in Europe safely, work and save money there. Therefore, examples of returnees who may have been deported or unsuccessful in their journey are set aside, to maintain the hope that their own journey will succeed. Moreover, there are some second-time migrants who decided to take the journey again. This can also affect the perception and risk expectations of potential migrants.

Most of the participants stated that they are highly aware of the risks, including trafficking activities, because they know at least one person who has migrated and conveyed these risks. Nevertheless, potential migrants do not consider them as obstacles that would dissuade them from taking the journey, which might show that there is a tendency to underestimate the danger. According to the participants, the desire for migration surpasses the fears. Regardless of how difficult the journey is, the potential of reaching Europe is perceived as making the associated risks worthwhile. Based on the results of the short survey completed by the participants, 46 per cent mentioned that they know someone personally who has migrated and lost his/her life, and 85 per cent of the participants know someone personally who has migrated and either faced danger or been hurt, providing further evidence of the risk awareness level among Gambian migrants.

## KEY FINDING SIX

**Gambians planning to migrate first try formal visa channels or at least learn about the visa process before they take the journey**

The majority of participants stated that they are aware of the visa process. They listed the requirements for a successful visa application process – for Europe or the USA – as follows:

- i) Educational background
- ii) Purpose of travel
- iii) Invitation
- iv) Employment letter
- v) Duration of stay
- vi) Financial background
- i) Connections who can support you

All of the participants reported that they either applied and had been rejected, or they know at least one person who has been rejected. The consular representation in the Gambia is also very limited, most applications have to be made in Dakar, Senegal. Therefore, the visa process is perceived as difficult and expensive. Considering the cost of the visa application and low approval rates, the “backway” is perceived as a more accessible option. For instance, one of the returnee participants said that they had applied for visas in three different European countries and were rejected by all of them before taking the backway. Germany, United States of America, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Italy, Spain, Cyprus and the Netherlands were listed as the countries that the participants had filed visa applications with that were rejected. Such experiences may also lead to potential migrants being dissuaded from attempting to file an application, considering themselves as ineligible based on awareness of rejected visa processes in their social network.

## KEY FINDING SEVEN

The diaspora is very effective in shaping Gambians' perspective on migration, presenting the life outside of the Gambia, motivating the Gambians to migrate and selecting the destination country

“You cannot go to Europe without knowing someone.”

Diaspora links constitute one of the most important underlying dynamics of the migration decision. The diaspora's impact can be illustrated at two different stages of the migration process: 1) before the journey; and 2) in the destination country.

- 1) Before migration: The diaspora maintain communication with their relatives and friends who live in the Gambia. Participants mentioned that besides their personal communication, they also follow diaspora members through social media, which makes them more curious about life in Europe and the USA. Additionally, the diaspora visit the Gambia during holiday periods which provides further opportunities for local contacts to learn of their experiences. According to the participants, during their visits, they buy or build houses, drive expensive cars and spend money easily, which attracts attention from locals. Self-comparison with friends or relatives in Europe generates motivation for migration. Most of the participants mentioned that their main aim is coming back to the Gambia, building a house, buying a car and opening a business. Regardless of what kind of jobs they do in Europe, the amount they could save is the main indicator for the success of their journey. Participants stated that diaspora members may be dishonest, or they may try to show off, sometimes exaggerating information about their living standards or jobs in Europe to comply with “success” expectations of the Gambian culture. This can result in false perceptions about the reality of migrants' experiences. Furthermore, the diaspora provides direct support in the preparation of a migration journey.

According to the participants, almost everyone who plans to travel to Europe has either a friend or relative in Europe. The diaspora does not only provide financial support to potential migrants, but also information on routes, available jobs and accommodation. Most of the returnee participants reported that they knew someone in the destination country and they were promised to receive help if they could reach Europe. Due to the strong family ties and collectivist culture, sending money from abroad as remittances is a product of a widely accepted social norm. It is a cultural responsibility for diaspora members to send money back to their family in the Gambia. Most of the family budgets depend on sources of income from abroad. The remittances sent from the diaspora is given without expectation of being repaid. The financial resources thus obtained may be used to finance other migration journeys. Even if the diaspora warns the potential migrants of the risks in the irregular route, they usually present a positive picture of the life in the intended destination. The diaspora rarely try to discourage potential migrants, and if they do, it might be perceived as dishonesty by the potential migrants. Participants reported that they do not assign much importance to the negative comments, because they believe that for everyone their migration outcome will differ and that diaspora may try to discourage them in order to avoid the burden of accommodating them if they can arrive in Europe. Furthermore, potential migrants believe that if life in Europe is more difficult than the Gambia, Gambian nationals in Europe would return instead of staying there to earn more money.



- 2) In the destination country: Diaspora may provide accommodation to newcomers in the destination country. Diaspora members who help newcomers do not usually expect any repayment, especially in the case of close friends or relatives. Yet, this may vary depending on the duration or amount of help offered. According to participants, you are more likely to receive free support for a shorter stay.

“When I first migrated to Sweden, my uncle gave me a place to stay in his home for two months, but he was not giving food. After two months, since I was still unemployed, he stopped helping me. I met with another Gambian who has a good income level there, he hosted me freely until I find a job, and after I started to earn my own money, we started to share the expenses half-half. “

Participants noted a difference between the USA and Europe. In the USA, as houses are often larger than in Europe, diaspora members can accommodate newcomers more easily. Sometimes babysitting a child of a relative is used as an opportunity to migrate for female Gambians. Diaspora members may call their relatives to come and look after their children, and they provide accommodation and food. Furthermore, the diaspora might help the newcomers by providing necessary information especially in the job searching process, they use their networks in order to arrange an employment opportunity for relatives or friends in the destination country.

## KEY FINDING EIGHT

### Networks are the most important factor in selecting the destination country

Most Gambians choose the destination country depending on whether they have a friend or relative there and select locations where they can have the maximum amount of support. It can therefore be said that networks are the most important factor in selecting the destination country.

There are three different main routes that irregular Gambian migrants take to reach Europe and each route generates distinct vulnerabilities. The first route is arriving to Italy through Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Libya. The second one is passing through Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Algeria, Morocco and arriving in Spain. The third route is fundamentally different than the others, it is a direct journey from the Gambia to Spain by makeshift boats. The first two routes take much longer than the last route. However, crossing the ocean by boat can be risky and deadly, it also requires payment for the whole journey in advance. Meanwhile on the other two routes, migrants may have a chance to earn money during their journey by working in transit countries or ask for families to send additional money.

There are also notable differences between the first two routes. According to the participants, some of whom tried both routes, the Algeria – Spain border is more secure, but the route is more expensive. According to the participants, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Scandinavian countries, Spain, Italy, Germany and the United States of America can be listed as the main intended destination countries. As the Gambia is a former British colony and receives many tourists from the United Kingdom, participants ranked it as the as the main intended destination country. For the Scandinavian

countries, participants stated that obtaining official documents after arriving there is easier compared to other destinations. Spain and Italy were classified as the easiest arrival countries in terms of entering the region. Participants perceived that migrants who do not know anyone in Europe choose Italy as the main intended destination. It was mentioned that mostly educational purposes shape the migration decision to the United States of America since it is difficult to arrive there through irregular channels.

Participants reported that most of the Gambian migrants choose Europe as their final destination rather than the countries within the region as they think that life in the Gambia is better than in neighbouring countries and those are thus not seen as attractive. According to data collected through DTM Flow Monitoring Surveys (FMS), the main intended destination is Italy (29%) followed by Spain (20%) which confirms the aforementioned observation.

## KEY FINDING NINE

### Migration plans are not long-term, return intention is very high

*“There is no place like home!”*

As mentioned above, the main expectation that shapes the migration decision and motivation is supporting the family economically. Most of the participants believe that many Gambians would be better off if they themselves or their family members can migrate to Europe. Many people in a family can be taken care of by a few people in Europe because of the employment opportunities, salary levels and high values of the European currencies. Moreover, they believe that although the journey itself could be challenging, after arriving in Europe, life will be easier. This is based on a perception that it will be easy to find a job and additional opportunities may arise, such as receiving support from the destination country in attending language courses. However, participants reported that if solutions could be found to their economic problems in the Gambia, they would prefer to stay. Most indicated positive feelings towards their country and a desire to spend their lives there. As such, their primary objective is to use the migration process as a means to save sufficient money to build a house, buy a car and start a business, and the intention is to return as soon as they earn enough money to support these goals.

However, according to the participants, returning is not always easy especially when the return takes place earlier than planned or preferred. In this case, achieving the goals and saving the desired amount of money to bring back home could be challenging. This can have an impact in several ways, for example, some migrants borrow money as a way to finance the migration journey, in addition to selling property or saving money from income generating activities. Although giving money to a close family member may not be considered as “debt” in the Gambia, the loss of family resources without the hoped return can create pressure on returnees. If the migrant borrows money from someone to take this journey, it is more difficult to come back without bringing sufficient money. Although, they face many difficulties during their journey and they want to go back to avoid any potential danger, “stigma” which is driven by personal responsibilities, social norms and pressure can make the process harder for the returnees. Participants believe that returning back with empty hands can be perceived as a shameful culturally.

All participants in the focus groups returned back to the Gambia with empty hands and only one of them made the full journey to Europe, all others came back either from Libya or Niger. Since they could not save any money, they spent their savings and even asked for the support of the families, leaving them feeling responsible and frustrated when the journey ended without achieving the desired goals of earning money to support themselves and their families. Moreover, although their families were happy that they could safely return back to home, they were sad at the same time because of the failure and negative outcomes of the journey including traumas driven by the challenges that the migrants faced and financial loss. However, besides the personal frustration and continuing economic problems they face because of the lack of opportunities in the Gambia, male participants did not state any particular reintegration challenges coming from the community, or any types of discrimination. The only community reaction was mentioned by the female returnees which will be explained below.

When asked about repeat migration, most of the returnees stated that they would consider migrating again as they could not succeed in their prior attempt(s) and their families still need help. In the discussion groups, there were returnees who had tried to migrate several times already through irregular channels. However, returnees who have faced more difficult challenges, especially the risk of dying, reported that they would not attempt to travel “backway” again, but rather seek to pursue formal channels. For example, in the discussion group with the returnees who had tried to take the boat to Spain, the participants who survived boat accidents reported that they would not take the irregular route again, whereas others who did not experience any accident mentioned that they will be attempting to take the same route again whenever they have sufficient money.

In the discussion with the diaspora members, return intention has been mentioned as well. Some of the participants stated that they want to return back to the Gambia and contribute to the development process of their country.

## KEY FINDING TEN

### Female and male migrants face different challenges throughout and after the journey

According to participants, female and male migrants may face different challenges before, during and after migration. First, push and pull factors may be accentuated for potential female migrants as they face additional difficulties in the Gambian job market. Potential female migrants and returnees stated that not all jobs are available for them in the Gambia, due to segregation in the job market. For instance, female Gambian nationals culturally are not permitted to be taxi drivers or mechanics. Potential female migrants believe that Europe offers more job options for women. Moreover, female participants argued that men are given more opportunities for job trainings and vocational programs.

Secondly, female participants think that if they can migrate, earn money and send it to their parents they would be empowered, less dependent and freer to make their own decisions. Participants reported that some women migrate to escape from forced marriage or domestic violence. Group discussions highlighted that the journey itself can empower women. Female returnees reported that, although they did not arrive

in Europe, taking the journey and safely returning proved for themselves and their families that they can survive alone, and manage their lives.

In the group discussions, it could be observed that risk awareness among women is lower than among men. Female returnees noted that prior to their journey, they were not expecting the scale of challenges to be faced during the migration process.

Female migrants face distinct threats during their journey as well. Sexual harassment was mentioned in all the discussion groups with female participants as a potential risk.

Female migrants do not only face challenges when they themselves migrate, but they also might suffer when their husbands or other male members of the family migrate and leave them behind. As migration is costly and sometimes the family needs to spend the resources of the family budget in order to support the migrant member, managing the household alone and taking care of the children possibly without being employed generates many vulnerabilities for women.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There are some areas of improvement that would create positive change in the economy and reduce the need to rely on migration as a means to obtain minimum standards of living for one's family.

The most fundamental reason for migration mentioned in the discussion was the lack of jobs that pay sufficiently to maintain minimum standards of living. Therefore, reducing unemployment levels and increasing wages can be expected to reduce the likelihood of people embarking on dangerous journeys. Agriculture and tourism are considered as the main sources of income in the Gambia which show high potential for investment and job creation. According to participants, the production capacity should be enhanced in the processing stage in the Gambian economy. Instead of exporting the raw materials and importing the final goods, raw materials should be processed and exported as the final goods. Furthermore, the majority of participants expressed their concerns about the corruption level and how it affects the economy of the country. It was argued that corruption discourages people to invest and start innovative businesses in the Gambia. It is important to note that problems in agricultural output are exacerbated by climate change and rural to urban internal migration. Gambia is experiencing a decline in agricultural output in some of the historically high production areas. Climate change adaptations to mitigate adverse effects on agriculture productivity are integral to avoid further disruptions on livelihood.

The report also found that the diaspora is effective in promoting economic development, particularly through remittances. Diaspora remittances should be leveraged and pooled for meaningful investment or to support livelihood options other than migration. Remittances can be leveraged by creating investment funds and tax breaks.

According to participants, tertiary education is not easily accessible. Most Gambian nationals cannot afford the cost of tuition fees. Scholarship options are limited as well. Moreover, it was argued that there is no diversity in terms of study subjects in the academic departments within the university. Education was seen by participants as being critical to developing skills and achieving a better life. Most participants believe that people with a higher education migrate less as they can find better options in the Gambia, and if they decide to migrate, they may have higher chances of being successful in their visa application and chose a regular migration channel. Participants perceived that those with higher levels of education are less prone to risking their lives on a dangerous journey.

Therefore, participants stated that expanding soft and technical skills would improve job opportunities in the Gambia. Vocational trainings should be more accessible and provide more technical skills. In order to understand the needs of employers, overcome the imperfect skill matching problem within the labour market, and increase opportunities for skill development, skill councils can be established. Skills councils are considered as a key driver to strengthen linkages between the industry and the training system for the youth. Female and male Gambians should be equally included in these skill programs.

Financial capital is the second most important need after trainings to have better jobs, as reported. Limited access to credit prevents Gambian nationals to either open or expand their businesses. As there is a limited number of firms that can employ large numbers of employees, self-employment is one of the main income-generating mechanisms in the country. Participants noted that they cannot expand their business even if

there is a high demand due to the lack of capital, which limits their ability to buy new machines or produce more goods and services.

As self-employment is an important source of income and there is a strong willingness to work independently, most participants indicated that they would prefer the option of starting their business over being employed by a firm. Moreover, participants reported a preference for managing their business alone, rather than with a business partner. However, working together, specifically forming cooperatives, could help overcome some challenges related to risk management and pooling the required resources.

The report highlighted the importance of social networks – participants reported having friends or families that migrated. Mentoring programmes involving local ‘champions’ can broaden social networks. These would provide alternative examples to irregular migration and raise local aspirations. Awareness raising activities may need to be reconsidered. The report found that close networks are the most important source of information for migrants. Diaspora members shape the image of life in the intended destination country. Potential migrants are selective, however, when it comes to gathering information from diaspora members, particularly ignoring warnings about the dangers of migrating. Therefore, honest dialogue between the diaspora and communities in the Gambia is important and should be fostered.

## INFORMATION GAPS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This report tried to shed light on the specific vulnerabilities and needs of Gambian economic migrants before, during and after their journeys by analysing the main factors that shape the decision-making process. The migration phenomenon forms a crucial element of life in the country. The majority of interviewed Gambian nationals participating in this study know at least one person who has migrated. Escaping poverty, finding a decent job, working for better standards of life and most importantly supporting the family are the main motivations for taking what are often dangerous journeys. The journey itself contains a lot of risks such as migrants experiencing hunger, thirst, sicknesses, and at times being trafficked and raped. There is awareness of the aforementioned risks, however, these do not act as a deterrent for those who decide to embark on the journey and risk their lives in the hope of pursuing better opportunities outside the country. The desire for migration reflects the perception that it is a pathway to success.

The findings of this study indicate that helping the family under conditions of poverty is the most important reason for migration. The decision-making process is also significantly affected by friends and relatives who are migrating or have already migrated. The most crucial necessity to start the journey is gathering enough financial resources for both regular and irregular migration. Most people are aware of the requirements of the visa processes in place, and most of the migrants apply for a visa before they take the unofficial routes. However, due to the high level of rejections, potential migrants also perceive themselves as likely to be rejected. Most people consider returning back to the country after they reach what they deem a sufficient amount of savings. Finally, men and women face different challenges, vulnerabilities and needs before, during and after the journey that should be analysed carefully in order to deliver differentiated support.

In order to investigate the factors that shape the migration decision further, understand the vulnerabilities and meet the needs stated in the report, there is a need for more comprehensive data collection and analysis methodologies in the country. An improved evidence base would be highly beneficial to inform policy and programming. Data collection activities on migration are very limited in the Gambia and there is a lack of comprehensive statistics on emigration. As mentioned in the IOM Guidance on Response Planning for Migrants Vulnerable to Violence, Exploitation and Abuse, collection and analysis of data on migration trends and patterns including vulnerabilities to violence, exploitation and abuse is needed<sup>13</sup>.

As stated in the report, Gambian migrants face many challenges before, during and after their journeys including the risks of being trafficked, kept in detention centres, exposed to sexual abuse, sicknesses and with the risk of dying on the journey. With a more systematic data collection, DTM could contribute to an enhanced understanding of these vulnerabilities and potential solutions.

Seeking to develop a more systematic approach to collect data on economic migration in the Gambia contributes to a variety of IOM objectives, such as understanding migrants' needs and vulnerabilities, providing safer journeys, preventing human trafficking, inhumane detention, protecting migrants from harm, and promoting long-term development.

An improved understanding of the main factors that shape the preparation period for migration such as saving sufficient money to cover the costs of migration, or collecting the necessary information specifically on the routes and risks, could lead to improvements in the design of programs that target potential migrants and help IOM in conducting information sessions for potential migrants. Similarly, recognizing the vulnerabilities and the needs of returnees by investigating the challenges during the journey would help to provide more targeted reintegration assistance. For instance, in addition to the reintegration packages that provide monetary support in order to encourage entrepreneurship activities, returnees may also need mental health support as their journeys have the potential to create lasting trauma. They might also need counselling services to manage the stigmatization they may experience from community members and the potential tense dynamics with families who have invested money in the journey and not received the expected remittances in return.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iom\\_guidelines\\_on\\_response\\_planning.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iom_guidelines_on_response_planning.pdf)

*"I am 24 years old now, the reason why I want to travel is that since I graduated from school, I have not been doing anything. I was at home doing nothing because of the financial problems. I have a friend who is planning to take the 'backway'. She was explaining to me the process. Then I decided that going to backway is better for me. If I can travel, I will try by all means to help my siblings for their further education so that they won't need anyone. I want to change the standard of living in my family."*

*"I know that I have all the capabilities to get my dream job and if I migrate, I would do everything that will help me to achieve my goals. I want to migrate to help my family with their living conditions. Sometimes it is very difficult to have enough money to buy food, seeing them in situations like that hurts me. I wish I could have enough money to get all the food my family wants. What I want to do is go to university and have a job."*

*"I lost my daughter in December 2019 in a boat that sank near the Mauritanian coast. She was among 62 people who lost their lives in that accident. The reason she took this boat was to migrate to Spain across the sea in order to find a job and save money there. She was only 27 years old and had a son who is now under the my (grandmother') care. I know that my daughter attempted to migrate just to help our family and send money to the Gambia without having any self-interested motives. My family do not have any source of income right now after losing my daughter who previously took care of us."*