

TOURISM AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE GAMBIA

The Gambia: a profile

Surrounded on three sides by French-speaking Senegal, which is more the 17 times larger, the Gambia is a long, thin country, 350km from west to east, but no more than 48km wide. The country's main geographical feature is the River Gambia.

The Gambia has a population of 1.1 m and is one of the smallest and most densely populated countries of tropical Africa. With a GNP per capita of \$320 (UK = \$14,570, Senegal = \$650) and a human development index of 0.281 (UK = 0.931) the Gambia is also one of the world's poorest countries. The annual population growth rate of 3.9% is the highest in West Africa, putting pressure on the country's limited resources. While 74% of the population live in rural areas, and 82% of the labour force is employed in agriculture, the urban population growth rate of 6.3% for the period 1980 to 1995 indicates the type of demographic shift evident throughout most of the developing world.

The Gambia is a multi-party democracy which achieved independence from the UK in 1965. English is the official language, though the vast majority speak only their tribal languages. Mandinka, Wolof and Jola are the principal cultural groups.

When Britain was the colonial power, there was little investment in health or education. Given the continued poverty of the Gambia, this problem has continued in the period since independence. The female literacy rate is 22.7%, male 50.9%, partly as a result of there having been only one school in the whole of the Gambia during the 1950s. There was considerable restructuring of the education system in 1992, to the extent that all children go to primary school for six years, terminating with a leaving certificate examination, which in part helps select who will go on to the limited secondary school placements. Many children are precluded from secondary education for economic reasons, poverty being such in some areas that many cannot afford even the most basic equipment such as pencils. Even so, there is a general acceptance amongst Gambians at all levels of society that education is the key to a way out of poverty. The Gambia opened its first university in 1999, which will help keep more of its educated young people in the country.

Economic activity

The 10-year period following independence was one of prosperity, with the economy growing at 4% p.a. on average. Inflation was low, foreign debt small and the government budget in balance. From the mid-1970s, however, this healthy trend was reversed, with economic problems reaching a head in 1985 when foreign debt repayment arrears

totalled \$14m – approximately 60% of GDP. The problem was linked to over-dependency on one product, groundnuts (peanuts).

Traditionally the production of groundnuts had been the dominant economic activity. Being a cash crop, groundnut cultivation tended to be adopted by men, whereas agriculture in general is largely (as much as 70%) undertaken by women. The Gambia was once described as a non-viable monoculture. However, the dominance of groundnuts on the Gambian economy has been receding rapidly for some time due to the fall in international prices for the product, as a result of agricultural surpluses elsewhere.

Against this background, the Gambia introduced an IMF/World Bank-inspired economic recovery programme, which at its core had the recognition of the role of tourism in the economic development process of the country, in terms of foreign exchange earnings and other benefits.



Figure 1: The Gambia, and its place in West Africa

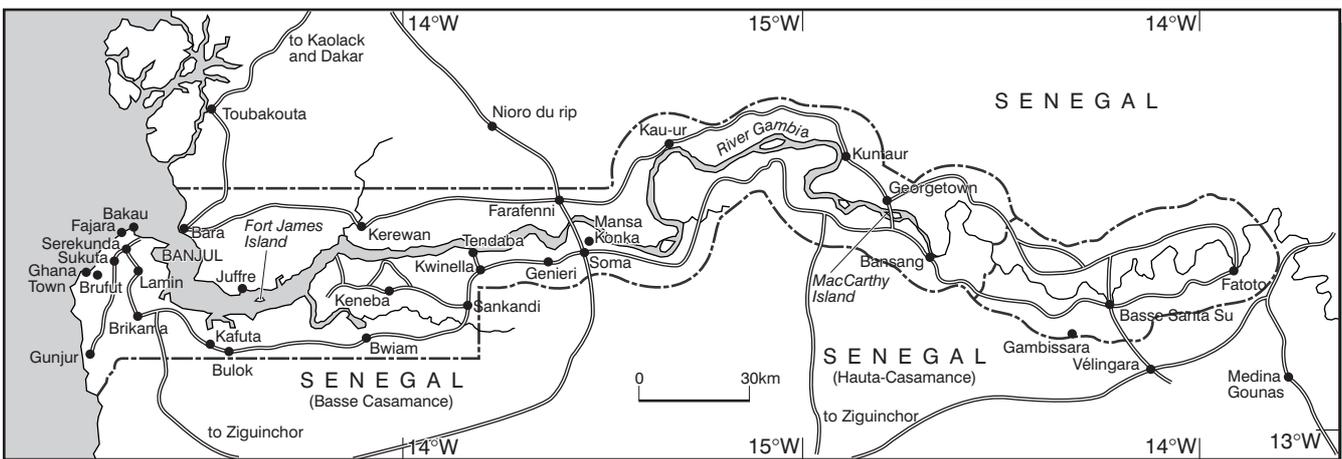


Figure 2: Gross domestic product (in Dalasi millions)

Industrial origin	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97
Agriculture	106.70	119.18	105.91	118.84	117.82	121.50	117.15
Groundnuts	26.69	30.16	19.66	27.50	28.96	26.94	16.42
Other crops	45.71	54.03	48.08	2.89	48.55	52.51	56.23
Livestock	24.24	25.13	26.14	26.85	27.89	29.00	30.16
Forestry	2.55	2.63	2.71	2.80	2.92	3.33	3.47
Fishing	7.51	7.23	9.32	8.80	9.50	9.72	10.87
Industry	61.89	62.98	67.07	69.95	61.55	64.84	66.57
Manufacturing	31.63	31.51	33.09	34.55	33.57	32.94	33.81
Construction & mining	27.16	28.31	30.57	31.82	24.32	28.23	28.65
Electricity & water	3.10	3.16	3.41	3.58	3.66	3.67	4.11
Services	296.50	307.37	319.01	334.67	314.82	327.80	343.97
Trade	85.10	87.40	89.80	81.09	80.55	74.25	72.09
Groundnut trade	9.50	10.26	8.73	12.90	13.93	13.03	8.73
Other trade	75.60	77.14	81.07	68.19	66.62	61.22	63.36
Hotels & restaurants	22.52	23.53	23.49	33.13	15.69	20.39	22.12
Transport & communication	77.52	86.63	90.18	104.06	105.55	118.41	131.52
Real estate & business	33.10	33.92	34.78	35.67	35.25	36.30	37.79
Services	56.50	57.63	58.68	60.23	59.65	60.71	62.48
Government services	21.76	21.76	22.08	20.49	18.13	17.24	17.97
GDP factor cost	465.90	489.53	491.99	523.46	494.19	514.15	527.69
Indirect taxes (net)	70.07	74.79	74.80	68.92	70.52	67.54	65.26
GDP at constant market prices	538.16	564.32	566.79	592.38	564.71	581.69	592.95

Source: Central Statistics Department

Tourism

It has been widely accepted over the past few decades that tourism can be a tool for development in developing countries, a way of weaning economies off overdependence on limited traditional exports. This type of development programme invariably involves the borrowing of money, always at high rates of interest. The Gambia has been no exception and, as a recipient country, is under huge pressure to repay (40% or 50% of current GDP is used just to service current debt).

Foreign currency receipts from tourism can be an important means of economic development. For example, the emerging Asian economies found tourism to be an important source of finance for capital goods imports during their industrialisation process. Tourism contributes 12% of Gambian GNP and employs more than 35,000 people.

The development of the Gambia as an international tourist destination started with the arrival of 300 guests from Sweden in 1965. They stayed

in two hotels in the capital, Banjul, which then had a capacity of 250 beds. By 1993/94 the number of guests had risen to 130,000, with around 90,000 of these arriving from

northern European countries. Numbers temporarily dropped by half in 1994, following a bloodless coup by the military, when the British Foreign Office advised

Figure 3: Benefits of tourism

According to the World Tourism Organisation, benefits accrued from tourism include:

- **Export earnings** International tourism is the world's largest export earner and an important factor in the balance of payments of many countries. Global foreign currency receipts outstrip exports of petroleum products, motor vehicles, telecommunications equipment, textiles or any other product or service.
- **Employment** Travel and tourism employ an estimated 100 million people around the world. The vast majority of tourism jobs are in small or medium-sized family owned enterprises. Research shows that job creation in tourism is growing 1_ times faster than in any other industrial sector.
- **Rural opportunities** Tourism jobs and businesses can be created in the most underdeveloped regions of a country, providing an incentive for residents to remain in rural areas rather than moving to overcrowded cities.
- **Infrastructure investment** Travel and tourism stimulate enormous investment in new infrastructure, most of which helps to improve the living conditions of local residents as well as tourists. Tourism development projects often include airports, roads, marinas, sewerage systems, water treatment plants, restoration of cultural monuments, museums and nature interpretation centres.
- **Tax revenues** The tourism industry provides governments with extra tax revenues each year through accommodation and restaurant taxes, airport taxes, sales taxes, park entrance fees, employee income tax and many other fiscal matters.
- **Gross Domestic Product (GDP)** International and domestic tourism combined generate up to 10% of the world's GDP and a considerably higher share in many small nations and developing countries.

tourists not to travel. The number of guests had already recovered by the winter season of 1996/97. There are now over 15 hotels in the 'tourist development area' (TDA), with a capacity of around 7,000 beds. The TDA, with its infrastructure, was developed between 1975 and 1980 with assistance from UNDP and financial assistance from the International Development Association.

Problems of tourism

While it cannot be denied that tourism is a highly important contributor to Gambian development efforts, an increasingly recognised fact concerning tourism and developing countries in general is the imbalance of economic reward for the host country vis-à-vis the donor country. In short, very little of what is spent by tourists filters through to local economies. The three principal benefactors of tourism tend to be international hotel chains, tour operators and airlines – usually these are foreign organisations. They control procurement of customers, transportation and food and lodging.

At best, a developing economy can expect to receive not more than 50% of the money spent for a holiday, even if the hotel is locally owned. In the case of the Gambia, where 'all-inclusive' holidays are common and four out of five hotels are either foreign or part foreign-owned, the economy makes less than 20%. Some hotels earn as little as £4 per night per person. Hotel workers earn as little as £1 per day and are laid off for the five-month wet season. Gambians rarely occupy

management positions – even in Gambian-owned hotels, these are reserved for foreign nationals. The Gambia provides an ideal location for the development of tourism, catering for Europeans who want to exchange the cold and gloom of a northern winter for guaranteed sunshine and temperatures of around 30°C. Some 112,800 tourists visited the country in the 1988/89 tourist season. With an estimated average expenditure per tourist of \$400, this amounted to about \$45 million, representing 10% or more of national GDP. In recent years over half of all tourists have come from Britain, and the remainder from Scandinavia (mostly Sweden), France and Germany.

Sustainable development and its application to the Gambia

'Sustainable development' has now become the development paradigm of the 1990s. The term is used by aid agencies, development planners and environmental activists alike in their policies. The most widely used definition of sustainable development comes from the 1987 Brundtland Report, 'Our common future', produced by the World Commission on Environment and Development:

'Sustainable Development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'
(WCEC 1987, p. 49).

The Brundtland view was enshrined in Agenda 21, which emerged from the 1992 UN Conference on

Environment (the 'Rio Summit'). This 27-principle action plan was signed by 182 governments who committed to the implementation of sustainable development in the 21st century.

Bearing these principles in mind, it can be seen that tourism in the Gambia is not being managed in a sustainable way at present. The negative social and cultural side-effects are numerous: sex tourism, drug abuse, child begging and most evident and difficult to avoid, the problem of the 'bumsters'. These are unemployed young men who hang around beaches and other areas, latching onto tourists and trying to sell them drinks, trinkets or anything else, or to arrange trips, in the hope of a tip; a by-product of the extremely high (75%) unemployment. They are generally quite inoffensive and harmless, but most European visitors are unaccustomed to this kind of attention and find it unwelcome. This lifestyle also attracts children away from school. As a response to these problems within the Gambian tourist industry, the government launched a National Policy for Tourism Development document in December 1996 to address key issues. These were principally: a commitment to more Gambian partners in decision-making processes, reducing foreign exchange leakages, and the training of tourist guides. The document also acknowledged a need to diversify into 'alternative forms of tourism'. The National Environment Agency (NEA), which is charged with implementation of the Gambian Action Plan 1992–2001, has advised the government that 'ecotourism' could help alleviate some of the pressures on land from agricultural expansion, by offering an alternative income and raising awareness of the value of conserving natural resources.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism can be seen as a niche within the tourist industry catering for those wanting to get first-hand experience of aspects of the natural world in a low-density, high-adrenalin environment. Whale-watching in Canada, trekking in Nepal, scuba-diving in the Red Sea and bird-watching in Israel are examples of tourism directly linked to the environment and marketed

Figure 4: Problems arising from tourism

- **Environmental damage** For example, the area around Mt Everest in Nepal is strewn with litter left by trekkers, and precious forests have been used to build hotels and lodges and as fuel for guests.
- **People are displaced** The Masai were excluded from their traditional grazing lands. Dislocated from their homelands, these people (who are often given no compensation) are forced into a more settled lifestyle, leading to poverty. Fishing communities are no longer allowed to fish at beach resorts. In Burma, people are being forcibly removed from their land to make way for a national park. Golf courses have been built on precious agricultural land in Bali.
- **The sex industry** Children are forced to work as prostitutes in Thailand and elsewhere.
- **Traditions have been debased** Ancient burial ground and culturally significant sites have been bulldozed to make way for hotels and resorts. Indigenous peoples are often seen as exotic objects and are expected to perform traditional music and dance for tourists.
- **Conflicts have resulted over the distribution of resources** In Goa hotels consume water that is needed for local agriculture.

Figure 5: Aims of Gambian tourism

- focused on the Gambia's natural resources, culture and history
- aids conservation efforts and does not impact negatively on natural resources
- generates economic activity and retains income locally in a sustainable way, particularly in rural economies
- is alternative to the existing sun-sea-sand tourism on the coast
- encourages positive cultural exchange and minimises negative social impacts
- provides an element of education or awareness-raising for visitors and Gambian nationals.

Source: 'Ecotourism in The Gambia', a discussion paper on the issues to be addressed by an ecotourism strategy, p. 12

accordingly. The Gambia is a prime site for ornithologists – the country, with an attractive and diverse rain forest environment, is home to over 500 species of bird.

Ecotourism at Tумани Tenda

The first rural community to complete an ecotourism development was Tумани Tenda, which opened in January 1999.

Tумани Tenda is situated in a clearing in the forest by the Kafita Balong, a tributary of the River Gambia. It is a village of 300 people, predominantly Muslim subsistence farmers. Agricultural produce include sweet potatoes, onions, brassicas, rice, peppers and tomatoes as well as plantains and fruit on trees. Virtually all of the arable work is undertaken by women – this can be very demanding, as irrigation systems still rely on water being drawn from wells for a large part of the year. There is no rainfall from October to May. Protein is obtained through stock rearing, cattle and goats and fishing the saltwater Kafita Balong with drop nets. Stock rearing and fishing are male preserves, a traditional gender role throughout large parts of Africa. The river banks are a morass of mangroves, the roots of which act as a further source of protein. The quality and abundance of foodstuffs for this virtually self-sufficient village (rice being the only import of note) account for the health and longevity of its population – almost 10 years above the national average – and assume massive significance in the absence of orthodox healthcare. The nearest doctor is 30km away, in Brikama, and the nearest hospital is

in the capital Banjul, 60km away. Outward indicators of lack of ready access to healthcare are problems relating to eyesight and poorly set limbs.

Housing in Tумани Tenda is primarily thatched roofs supported by mud walls. For the dry part of the year most activity takes place outside. All meals are cooked outside, and washing is done by the river. There is no electricity. Family sizes are average for the Gambia, at six to eight children, with the eldest son being the only one to stand any chance of an education.

In 1997 the village won a national competition for its forest and garden projects. The prize was 70,000 Dalasi (about £4,000) worth of equipment which they could choose. A collective decision was made to invest this equipment into providing a basic tourist development to cater for environmentally orientated visitors. A further donation of 9,000 Dalasi from VSO enabled construction of the huts and toilet facilities to start, reaching completion for its visitors in January 1999. Being a village initiative, all the money made through the ecotourism scheme can be used to enhance the local economy and the quality of life of the people of the village.

Visitors are encouraged to take part in agricultural activities, fishing and cooking in the local style, as well as participating in guided tours of the local environment. The scheme is run by a number of committees e.g. entertainment, security, cooking, cleaning and waste management (a key issue in a settlement without any sanitary infrastructure along western lines). The whole village was involved in building the camp. None of the staff are paid wages – they are satisfied that they will

benefit from the community projects it will pay for. Priorities are seen as providing access to education for the village children, and health care for all.

Whilst the appeal of this type of ecotourism experience would in a large part be limited to students of biodiversity and rural economies and life in tropical regions, it does offer a viable alternative to a beach holiday for those visitors wishing to see life beyond the travel brochure.

The extent to which cash generated from this type of tourist experience can in any meaningful way contribute to economic development is doubtful. Yet as an insight to sustainability and sensitively managed ecosystems, it has much value.

Bibliography

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FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. Define the following terms: demographic shift, multi-party democracy, cultural group, inflation, indigenous peoples, ecotourism.
2. Explain the likely problems to a country's economy of being dependent on a single export product.
3. Describe the range of problems posed by non-sustainable tourism.
4. In what ways can the industrial profile of the Gambia be seen as typical for a poor country?