

# The Gambia

The Gambia gained independence from Britain in 1965, establishing multi-party democracy with parliamentary elections every five years. A military takeover in July 1994 was roundly condemned internationally and intense pressure forced the military-led government to institute a democratic government. Presidential elections took place in July 1996 and again in October 2001. The country is now relatively stable with occasional clashes between rival political parties.

The Gambia is a small strip of land varying from 24km to 48km in width, with a total area of about 11,000 sq km, surrounded on three sides by Senegal. It is mainly grassland and tropical forests, with mangrove swamps in tidal areas along the river. Tourism produces about 60 per cent of the country's foreign earnings but over 73 per cent of the rural people work in agriculture and under-employment is high.

Gambians have strong traditions and values deeply rooted in Islam. About 95 per cent of people are Muslim and the rest are Christian or hold traditional beliefs. Several ethnic groups live peacefully side by side. The main ones are Mandinka, Wolof and Fula, each with their own language. The official language is English.

## Factfile

**1.3m people live in The Gambia**

**1 in 13 children die before they reach their fifth birthday**

**Life expectancy is 55 years**

**Only 23% of the rural population have access to adequate sanitation**

**73% of women cannot read or write**

inappropriate farming techniques, environmental degradation and natural disasters, such as drought and floods. The removal of agricultural subsidies and liberalisation of the groundnut trade in the 1980s caused increased hardship for farmers. Low levels of literacy, leading to lack of skills and slow technological progress, also cause poverty.

We provide skills training for poor people in local communities so that they can fully participate in bringing about the changes they need to gain their basic rights. To achieve this we are working with over 600 local partner organisations and associations, whose approach is based on *tesito* (the Mandinka word for self reliance) and participation.

## Key areas of work

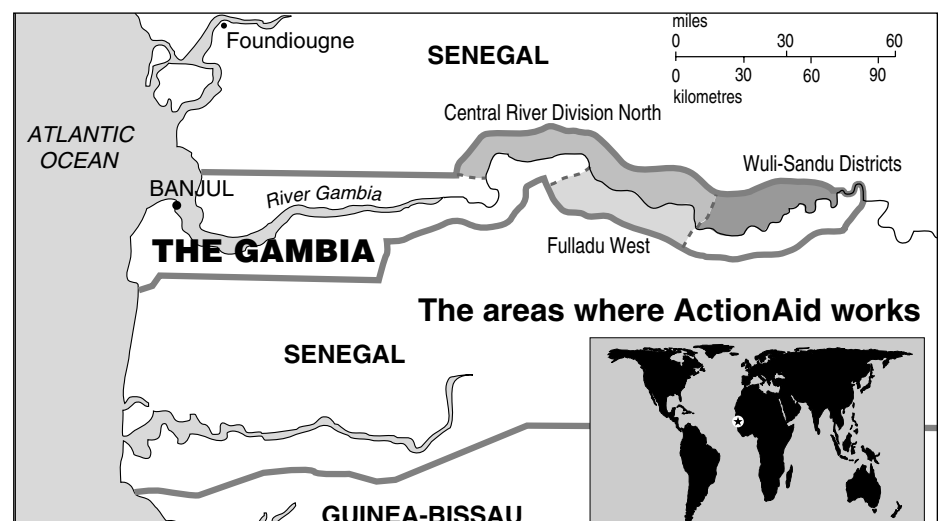
### Food security

Farmers are dependent on rain to irrigate their crops and are therefore particularly vulnerable to drought. Food production has been declining for more than 10 years, mainly because of decreasing rainfall. We work with local communities to analyse local rainfall, population and production levels, as well as grain and livestock prices, so that people can manage their food supply more efficiently. We provide seeds and fertilisers to the communities, as grants upon request.

## ActionAid in The Gambia

ActionAid began operating in The Gambia in 1979. We work mainly with subsistence farmers in over 600 villages in three rural areas, shown on the map below.

Groundnuts provide 85 per cent of the country's export earnings. The main food crops are maize and rice, but poor people living in rural areas cannot produce enough food for themselves. This is due to



Grain and cereal bought when prices are low are stored and sold to the communities at affordable prices to be repaid in kind at harvest time. To help poor people cope with long spells of drought in some areas, we have set up over 600 seed banks for more than 15,000 households and more than 150 cereal banks for over 4,500 households.

## Education

We help to improve poor people's access to education because literacy gives them the ability to understand their basic rights. We have set up Access centres that are linked to the formal education system, giving basic literacy and numeracy classes to children at flexible times to fit in with their farming and housework. We also train Parent Teachers' Associations in school management skills. PTAs play an active role in motivating parents to send their children, especially girls, to school. In 1999 Access centres gave 1,550 children the skills to go on to formal schools. In 2000, five per cent more girls than boys enrolled in the schools and Access centres.

We are taking part in ActionAid's global education campaign, *Elimu*, at national level by helping the government to develop and

promote local policies and practices which will improve the provision of quality and relevant education for all, especially for poor and marginalised people.

## Helping local organisations to improve their skills

Local organisations need support to effectively manage their resources and in turn help local communities gain their basic needs and rights. Working with partner organisations and local community groups, we provide training in civic and gender awareness, erosion control, financial management and enterprise development (especially to help women manage their local village banks), as well as safe-water handling to maintain water quality.

## Gender

In some cultures women are still in a subordinate position and men traditionally have control of land tenure. Women and girls continue to be deprived of education, resources and decision-making powers. We help to train local communities to recognise and overcome gender stereotyping and all forms of discrimination against women. We also work closely with government planning units and the Women's Bureau to help achieve social justice and equity. Issues of women's equity are taken into consideration in all our main activities.

## HIV/AIDS

The incidence of HIV/AIDS in The Gambia is gradually increasing so we work with the government and a consortium of other national organisations, including people living with HIV/AIDS, to increase awareness and provide training in HIV/AIDS prevention. For example, we are working with the government's Health and Education Unit to hold discussions and show films about HIV/AIDS in communities. And in 2000 we trained a local organisation working with women and children in tourist areas.

## Paralegal training helps Sainey get his rights

**ActionAid's rights-based approach enables poor people to understand their rights and use them to influence the government to provide their basic needs.**

**Sainey Sillah heard about our Legal Centres on the radio and was able to seek legal advice and secure his land, which he had almost lost through intimidation by one of the village elders.**

**"At first I was scared because Yaya Fatty is one of our village elders and indeed very powerful," Sainey said. "But the assurance given to me by the paralegals was that we are all equal before the law. That is, I have the same rights as Yaya Fatty when we go before the courts. This is what gave me courage to go to the district chief to lodge the complaint and ask for a summons to be issued to Yaya Fatty. The case was heard by the district tribunal and judgement was made in my favour. At last, I now have full access to my farm land, which I inherited from my father. Without the advice of the paralegals I would not have had access to my own property and would have continued to live in poverty and without a piece of land to farm on."**

## Power tiller training for women

**The power tiller is a heavy machine used for ploughing. It is generally assumed that women cannot operate it. As a result, the men who operate these machines benefit from the proceeds and the women who are the main rice growers lose ownership and control of the equipment. In order to break this gender stereotyping, we trained 22 women across the rice growing areas to operate and maintain the machines. Nandingha Fofana of Jakaba village says she feels "very proud" to be one of the first women to be trained. She can now plough her own rice field and provide services to other fields close to her.**

## Funding

ActionAid in The Gambia is mainly funded by child sponsorship, official sources, companies, affiliated organisations in The Gambia and ActionAid Alliance partners in Ireland, Italy and Spain.

ActionAid is a unique partnership of people who are fighting for a better world – a world without poverty.

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Fact sheets available

Countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Burundi, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Ghana, Guatemala, Haiti/Dominican Republic, India, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Somaliland, Uganda, Vietnam, Ayuda en Acción (Spanish partner).

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