

THE IJR WEEKLY LENS

7 July 2025 Column

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MIXED REACTIONS TO THE NEW GAMBIA/SPAIN CIRCULAR MIGRATION DEAL

Cape Town: During my time as the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) News bureau chief based in Dakar, Senegal, the first story I filed was a migration story. I went out on the Atlantic Ocean with a UN organisation that was searching for people who might be in danger or in trouble while attempting to reach Spain, particularly the Canary Islands, in often rickety boats. The waters are rough—think Cape Town's cold and rough seas—and imagine being in a rickety boat, having paid thousands to unscrupulous people smugglers.

During my time out on the waters, I could only imagine the harrowing experiences of those aboard these fragile vessels, risking their lives for a chance at a better future. As a follow-up story, I visited one of the villages outside of Dakar, where communities would fundraise to send young people on one of the

boats to seek a better life. This fundraising effort was aimed to ensure that money would be sent back to the communities. For many families, it was about survival, and they saw heading to Europe—albeit illegally—as the only option. I recall that the atmosphere in the village was charged with a mix of hope and fear as families gathered to share their stories and support one another. Each departure was both a farewell and a prayer, as families clung to the dream of a brighter future for their sons.

Seeking Opportunities

The Gambia is the smallest country in Africa, and Senegal almost completely surrounds the country. On a map, it appears as a narrow strip of land primarily following the course of the Gambia River.



Like many African countries, Senegal and The Gambia have thousands of young people who are unable to get into the job market. For many, the prospect of unemployment and the inability to support their families is deeply disheartening and leaves them disillusioned. At this point, the idea of heading to Europe illegally, despite the associated costs, becomes appealing. The hope of a better life fuels this dangerous journey, yet it often leads to harrowing experiences and uncertain futures. Many embark on this perilous path, driven by desperation to escape their circumstances, only to face new challenges in foreign lands. However, not everyone reaches Europe, and it's not the land of milk and honey either.

We have all seen the horrific images of boats capsizing and those on board, including women and children, dying. When some do reach Europe, they are kept in asylum camps, and often the conditions are harsh. These camps can be overcrowded and lacking in basic necessities, further exacerbating the trauma these individuals have already endured.

Youth Unemployment Bulge...

Estimates place The Gambia's population at around 2.82 million, with over 60% under the age of 25. According to The Gambia Statistics body, the unemployment rate is less than 8% and currently stands at 7.6%.

However, this statistic pales in comparison to another survey conducted and released in 2023, in collaboration with the Gambian government and several local and international stakeholders, which examined the labour force status of the working-age population. On average, only 43.6% of individuals of working age were participating in the labour market, either through employment or active job seeking. The remaining 56.4% were outside the labour force. This group included students (23.4%), subsistence farmers (9.4%), and the elderly individuals, people living with disabilities, and discouraged job seekers (23.6%). This report highlighted the necessity of targeted policies to engage the significant portion of the population that remains outside the labour force.

According to World Bank data, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed more Gambians into poverty. Data from the 2020/21 household survey indicated that more than half of Gambians (53.4% or 1.1 million) were living in poverty. For many young people, saving money and heading to Europe, in the hope of finding a job and sending money back home to their families, becomes one of the few viable options.

Circular Migration

Spain signed a circular migration deal with Senegal and The Gambia last year to curb the surge of illegal migration. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on circular migration was subsequently ratified by Spain and The Gambia. This agreement aims to facilitate legal pathways



for immigrants while enhancing cooperation on border management and security.

Last year, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez visited the region and said: "Our countries will sign a memorandum of understanding on circular migration. This new initiative aims to facilitate safe, orderly, and regular migration that benefits both our countries and our citizens," he said at a press conference in The Gambia. According to Spain's interior ministry, between January and August last year alone, more than 22,000 people had arrived on the islands.

Sánchez added that there was a 'need for migrant workers in Spain's aging society.' "It is a need that involves certain problems, and for this, we must push for formulas that allow us to manage the phenomenon of migration in a humane, safe, and orderly way to benefit our respective societies," the Prime Minister said. He emphasised the importance of collaboration with the three West African countries to create effective solutions that benefit communities in the countries.

First Groups of Gambians Head to Spain

Almost a year later, in July this year in Banjul, The Gambia, the country's Department of Information Services (DOIS) held a press conference to launch the circular migration deal and announce the first batch of workers that were heading to Spain.

More than 10,000 Gambians applied for the few hundred positions that will see people work in agriculture on farms in Catalonia. The agriculture sector will contract these workers for three months, offering them a monthly income of approximately 1000 euros (R20,000). This initiative aims to provide economic opportunities for Gambians while addressing labour shortages in Spain's agricultural sector. Workers will receive free accommodation.

The DOIS stated that this new path will address youth unemployment and that the pilot programme will ensure safe, legal, and structured migration for Gambians. The Gambian government believes that, with the structured migration framework, locals can thrive economically and support their families in The Gambia.

Criticism from Migration Sector: Underlying Neo-Colonial Aspects

According to Rossella Marino and Mustapha Sallah, writing for the migration organisation [Migration Control](#), the authors critiqued the deal, arguing that the deal has ‘underlying neocolonial and neoliberal aspects; the agreement functions as a tool of migration control’. They also write that the scheme has ‘produced disparate reactions among Gambians and also resentment at having to work abroad rather than at home’.

However, they noted that many also have high hopes of being selected for this regular migration opportunity, but that the agreement and the debates ‘once again demonstrate how Africans have to play the game of global neoliberal economics for their survival while being aware and critical of its exploitative politics.’

There is certainly no easy answer on this; it’s a complex dynamic that highlights the ongoing struggle for many individuals not only in The Gambia but across Africa, where young people face unemployment and very few opportunities. These young people and their communities hold the desire for a better life, which often leads to a delicate balancing act between aspiration and the harsh realities of migration. For the Gambian government, this landmark circular migration deal is viewed as stemming the illegal migration tide.

In the short-term, it is creating legal routes, but it won’t be stopping many others from still trying to head to Europe illegally in search of new opportunities. The reality is that as long as economic instability and limited prospects persist at home, the allure of foreign opportunities will continue to drive individuals to take significant risks, often leading them into perilous situations.

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