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The Gambia, Water and Sanitation

Solving Sanitation Problems in The Gambia

The Gambia is a country in West Africa surrounded by Senegal except for its west border at the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. The Gambia is named after the Gambia River that flows through the country, and it is the smallest country in the mainland of Africa (“Gambia, The – The World Factbook”, Jones). The Gambia became independent from the United Kingdom on 18 February 1965 (“Gambia, The – The World Factbook”). The Gambia’s national symbol is the lion, and its national colors are red, blue, green, and white (“Gambia, The – The World Factbook”).

As of July 2021, the population of The Gambia is 2,221,301, with an urban population of 61.3% and a rural population of 38.7% (“Gambia, The – The World Factbook”, “The Gambia | Culture”). Thirty-eight percent of The Gambia’s land is arable, and their major crops are fruits, including mangoes and avocados, vegetables, including onions and potatoes, oil trees, including cashew and oil palm, and cereal grains, including rice and maize (“Gambia, The – Agriculture”). The average farm size in The Gambia is 1.5-2 hectares, which is approximately the size of 2.5 football fields (Oliviera). The Gambia’s climate is semi-arid with one wet season followed by a seven-month dry season, and it is located in the flood plain of the Gambia River flanked by low hills (“Gambia Agriculture”, “Gambia, the Geography”).

The Gambia has a presidential republic, with a mixed legal system of English common law, Islamic law, and customary law (“Gambia, The – The World Factbook”). The universal age of suffrage is the age of 18 (“Gambia, The – The World Factbook”). Gambians vote with marbles, dropping marbles in the hole marked with the candidate they choose (Jones). The Gambia has three branches of national government: executive, legislative, and judicial (“Gambia, The – The World Factbook”). The executive branch has a president with a five-year term and no term limits, a vice president, and a cabinet appointed by the president (“Gambia, The – The World Factbook”). The legislative branch has a unicameral National Assembly with 58 seats, 53 directly voted for and five appointed by the president (“Gambia, The – The World Factbook”). The judicial branch has its highest court, Supreme Court of The Gambia, with justices appointed for life or mandatory retirement at the age of 75, as well as subordinate courts, including Court of Appeal and High Court (“Gambia, The – The World Factbook”). The Gambia has 12 notable political parties (“Gambia, The – The World Factbook”).

There are nine tribes that live harmoniously in The Gambia (Jones). The average family size in The Gambia is 8.5 members, with an average of 6 members in urban areas and 15 members in rural areas (“The Gambia | Culture”), and a typical rural dwelling are traditional houses with mud walls, thatched roofs, and overhanging eaves (Knudsen). A traditional extended family is a vital role in Gambian society, and it is seen as a symbol of status to have a large family and more than one wife (“Gambia Family Structure”). It is found that many households in The Gambia hold up to 3 generations (“Gambia Family Structure”). The typical familial hierarchy is first the head, then temporary head, then the spouse, then children, the son’s children, the daughter’s children, the head’s parents, brothers and sisters, nephews, and lastly, nieces (“Gambia Family Structure”). Individuals tend to become the head around the age of 40, and heads are usually men (“Gambia Family Structure”). Hierarchies are complicated and constantly changing due to polygamy in the typically Muslim households, with wives changing places (“Gambia Family Structure”). Respecting elders is particularly important in Gambian society, and Gambians show their respect through special greetings (“Gambia Family Structure”). In a Gambian village, there is what

Gambians call the Alikaalo, the oldest man from the village's founding family, and the village's leader ("Gambia Family Structure"). There are now more educated women working in The Gambia, and this is changing the roles wives typically play ("Gambia Family Structure").

A typical family diet in The Gambia consists of a staple of white rice, and dishes including afra, tapalapa, domoda, and okra stew, and Gambian families typically grow their own food ("Traditional Gambian Food", "Food Crisis"). Most Gambian people work in agriculture and tourism, and the average income is 410,956 GMD, which is under \$8,000 USD ("Gambia - Jobs", "Cost of Living"). Education in The Gambia is compulsory from the ages 7-15, but education does not reach everyone; and in healthcare, there are a shortage of doctors and other medical personnel due to underpayment, and medical supplies are stretched dangerously thin (Thelwell). In The Gambia, 34% of people have access to clean water and 31% to proper sanitation ("Water, Sanitation"). Only 42% percent of people have access to electricity, and 51% to the internet ("Gambia - Market", "Telecommunication"). There are 2300 kilometers (about 1430 miles) of paved, gravel, and dirt roads (Conrad). The Gambia has a lack of predictable and coordinated economic policies ("Gambia - Energygambia"). The Gambia is a food deficit country, only producing half its own consumption needs and only 10% of the staple rice crop is grown locally (Thelwell).

There are issues with water and sanitation in The Gambia. Only 47% of Gambian households have access to basic sanitation, and only 34% use safely managed drinking water services ("Water, Sanitation"). Trends with water and sanitation in The Gambia are improving because primary schools use WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) facilities meeting national standards ("Water, Sanitation"). There are significant disparities between rural and urban populations, with urban services being superior to rural services ("Water, Sanitation"). Ensuring gender separate facilities meeting women's needs is a key focus in The Gambia ("Water, Sanitation"). Children have access to cleaner water at school the elderly typically do not have access to, and poor sanitation disproportionately affects women, girls, and the elderly, as well as disabled people ("Progress on Household"). Poor sanitation in water affects the environment because it causes more water-borne pathogens, as well as parasites like roundworms and dysentery (Dowse).

One solution to the problem of poor sanitation is building more public bathrooms. If these public bathrooms have safe, clean drinking water, it will help families have access to hygiene they do not have at home. This solution could work very well since only 1% of the population practices open defecation as of 2020 ("Water, Sanitation"). Another solution to this problem is instituting a governmental program with jobs for cleaning roads and public spaces, as well as having cleaning standards instated. This will help Gambian people with jobs, keep public spaces and roads clean, and lower the likelihood of people becoming sick due to infections that come from uncleanness. To fund the project, the Gambian government will need to set aside money, and Non-Governmental Organizations like the Gates Foundation can also help Gambians with this project. The Gambian government can create community-led programs, like a committee, and can also create a system like the 'Adopt a Road' system in the United States, where a person or family 'adopts' a portion of the road to keep it clean. They can also institute a friendly competition between villages, where they compete to see who can keep their village the cleanest. In order for this project to work, members of the Gambian community will need to work to keep roads, public spaces, and bathrooms clean. The people implementing the project will need to keep what the Gambian people say in mind, as well as respect sacred lands and spaces. There will be an impact on the community if this is implemented. Cleanliness will help cut down disease, and that in turn will help things run smoothly. There are current projects focusing on sanitation, like the WASH project in Gambian primary schools, but that doesn't guarantee clean water for everyone, especially with the rural disparity ("Water and Sanitation"). There needs to be further steps taken, and the project I propose can help with that. The project can be sustainable if there is continuous funding from the Gambian government after an

initial larger fund to jumpstart the project. Another piece that will help with sustainability is making sure to filter the rain and river water used in the bathrooms. People's enjoyment and encouragement of the services will also help the project be sustainable. These improvements to sanitation will not solve all of the problems in The Gambia, but they will be immensely helpful for Gambians who do not have access to the sanitation they need and deserve.

Of course, the government does have its limitations. Some barriers the Gambian government could face is a lack of funding and resources. The government currently in place in The Gambia is relatively new, after having overthrown a dictator recently. There is relative political stability in The Gambia but does not make everything perfect. The system I have kept in mind is a system that focuses on local governments rather than the national government. This allows for locals to have more of a say in what takes place. Smaller leaders of cities and villages should be the ones leading the citizens in keeping local spaces clean. If ordinary citizens feel the need to point out places they believe should be cleaner, they should be able to go to their local leaders. If the local leaders do not have the resources to do as asked, they should be able to go to the national government, and if all else fails, Gambians should be able to rely on a Non-Governmental Organization for funding or supplies.

Building public bathrooms and instituting a program for cleaning roads and public spaces will help Gambians become more sanitary, making their lives easier in the process. Both national and local governments should be able to play a role in helping to improve their citizens' lives. Ordinary citizens should in turn be able to trust their government to help protect and supply them. The Gambia is a country that deserves to be respected, and helping Gambians get proper sanitation is a major factor in that respect.

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