

**THE GAMBIA COUNTRY PAPER ON THE AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT
FORUM (ADF V) 16TH – 18TH NOVEMBER 2006 –
ADIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA**

Introduction

The Gambia is a developing nation located in West Africa with an estimated population of 1.5 million of which almost 68% are rural.

Though The Gambia is one of Africa's smallest states, the country has one of the highest population rates (3.5%) and is also one of the most densely populated states in the world (95 per sq km). The youth comprise over about 60% of the population. Given this high youth component of the population and given The Gambia's limited resources empowerments, it is imperative to fully involve young men and women in national development efforts by giving high priority to human resources development, and by utilising the innate potential of young men and women.

1. Youth and Economic Development

The themes "Youth and Economic Development" recognises that youth are the leaders now and tomorrow and must lead and dictate our national economic endeavours. However, for this to take place society in general, particularly youth must understand what our national economic tasks are, these must be a collective will to develop this leadership team and, paying particular attention to individual aspiration.

Economic development strategies and plans cannot be drawn without focusing on youth and recognise their role in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Identifying and achieving our national economic development task, building and maintain a cohesive and efficient national team of youth capable of leading in the identification and accompanying the national task, recognising and development of the individual are all functions that overlaps and reinforces each other ushering youth into leadership role.

- (1) The "Youth problem" in The Gambia is critical and cut across all sectors. Its root cause can, however, be traced in the inherited colonial style of formal education where one is only prepared for office jobs. As this cannot go round with the teaming youth population and school leavers (of over 15, 000 annually), from grade 6 – 12. This

failure to secure jobs leaves the youth with that sense of not belonging, inadequacy and low self-esteem, leading to the feeling of marginalisation and being prone to idleness, delinquencies, "bumsterism" (being nuisance to tourists) substance abuse and forlorn hopelessness.

The Gambia government, in recognition of these defects, in the education system formulated the Education Action Plan of 1988 – 2003. This policy, among others, was able to reinforce into the education system, technical education curriculum with particular emphasis at the middle level (grade 7 -12).

Consistently, and with a view to eschew the youth from malaise and lure them toward effective participation in national development, The Gambia has over the years, enacted sound policies and strategies aimed at creating the enabling environment for an invigorating and forward looking approach to youth empowerment and self actualisation.

Important among these policies are the National Youth Policy and Action Plan (NYPPA), which gave birth to the creation of the National Youth Council (NYC) and National Sports Policy (NSP). Other policies and programme targeting youth enhancement are the National Employment Policy and Plan of Action (NEPA), the Vision 2020 Incorporated, and the setting up of micro credit institutions like the Indigenous Business Advisory Services, (IBAS), Village Saving and Credit Associations (VISACA), and the National Enterprise Development Initiative (NEDI). These measures have impacted positively to ameliorate the youth problem in The Gambia resulting in the mushrooming of a myriad of youth groups, and associations such as the National Association of Youth and Children Organisation, UNESCO Clubs, and West African Bird Study Association (WABSA) National Youth Parliament to name a few working towards mainstreaming young people into productivity and becoming responsible citizens.

The impetus these policies have created could also be felt in the increased skills training institutions such as the Gambia Technical Training Institute, Bundung Skills Centre, Julangel Skills Training Centre, President's International Award, and Young Men's Christian

Association (YMCA). However, key among these youth institutions and a focal point in government efforts at practical empowerment of youth, through life skills for self-empowerment and actualisation, is the national Youth Service Scheme (NYSS).

- (2) The Youth Policy and Action Plan (2000-08) was developed through a National Consultative process coordinated by the Department of State for Youth and Sports. This policy document and action plan provides a new vision and focus on youth issues in a rapidly changing social, environment. The policy does not only put premium on youth participation, but more importantly it focuses on youth as key instruments in setting the pace of national development.
- (3) Youth participation: Recognition that Gambian young men and women are an important and fostering and nurturing of education both in numbers and quality is strategically linked with our national economic development efforts. Not only must schools at all levels are being commissioned, the depth of learning, accessibility and orientation towards our national felt needs are continuously being improved also mainstreaming life skills training and entrepreneurship for employment opportunities as a strategic drive in our education policy is not only important in addressing the problems of employment but crucial in dispelling the myths and social taboos associated with such noble and dignified profession. The NYSS is one of the government efforts at empowering youth through skills training. The scheme's programme recruits youth from all regions in the country and train them at institutions where their choice of skills are offered and/or at their localities, continues to be a laudable effort.

The NYSS is an institution of national significance where government's crusade for practical youth development, capacization and empowerment are delivered to the youth. The NYSS seeks to train the youth to appreciate the dignity in labour, inculcate discipline, imbue the youth with the spirit of self-reliance and encourage them to create rather than seek jobs.

The scheme runs two programmes namely: the NYSS regular programme and the Apprenticeship Training Programme (ATP).

The regular programme targets youth who have completed grade 9 (18 – 25 years), irrespective of exam results, for skills training.

- (a) The programme last for 2 years, during (formal sector) skills training institutions.
- (b) The Apprenticeship Training Programme targets two categories of youth between (13 – 25 years) namely: those who could not go beyond grade 8 and those who could not attend school at all. The programme last for 3 – 4 years, respectively, during which time they are deployed (in the informal sector) with mentor/workshops.

The NYSS pays the tuition fees of these youth to the training institutions for the entire period.

In addition a stipend of D200 (about UD \$10) per month is given to each of them.

The scheme has since its inception in 1996 trained 1404 youth in different professions, and our garget is to train over 3000 young Gambians with marketable skills for self-reliance by the year 2015.

- (4) In recent months The Gambia has witnessed an increase in youth migration to Europe through desperate means (by boat in the high seas) with the desperado slogan “Barcelona Wala Barsaha” (meaning Barcelona in Spain or death), not only highlights the impatience and restlessness of this segment of our population but also implores on the policy makers to collectively and soberly reappraise our national programmes and policies with a view to making them more responsive to the rapid changing social and economic dynamics.

The Establishment of the National Aids Secretariat through the assistance of the Global fund has enhanced the citizens’ awareness of the deadly disease especially among the youth. In addition, the Department of Youth and Sports in partnership with the UNFPA

established an Adolescent Youth Reproductive Health Project which seeks to harmonise sexual and reproductive health related problems within the youth sector and the nation at large in collaboration with stake holders. The project has been able to prepare a training manual on sexual and reproductive health with a view to train youth and youth trainers to be the key players in the creation of awareness and for promotion of healthy relationship among adolescent/youth. It also offers youth leaders the opportunity to assist young people live better and healthy lives, as information, communication and behavioural change techniques are undoubtedly the foundation to positively influence the youthful population.

2. Youth and Social Development

It must be recognised that the youth is a potential engine for growth and development. Social development in our present age calls for the need for the African mind particularly the youth to be innovative. In this age at science and technology, we cannot remain just at the receiving end, the African youth must therefore be ready for change in this 21st century.

In really examining youth and social development, we cannot loose sight of the cornerstone of poverty, misery and under development, which continue to plague the whole of the African continent.

Overcoming poverty in Africa ultimately defines an obvious role for the youth of Africa. Today's youth must be determined to achieve socio-economic independence as a follow-up to the political independence that youth of yesterday achieved. Above all the calamity that are impeding development in today's world, such as unfair trade, high oil prices, dependency syndrome etc needs urgent reshaping the African Youth is to prosper from our ailing economies.

Education plays a major role in social development since it is the forefront of development, be it social, economic or political. Education is the key to fight poverty. As youth are key in the development process, they must therefore possess the energy, creative imagination, enthusiasm and dynamism as necessary ingredients in the drive to attain social development but also economic and political development. Fundamental in social development is the need for the youth to focus on self-reliance.

The government of The Gambia, in recognising these challenges, facilitated the establishment of the President Awards Scheme (PAS) in 1984 which was later renamed President's International Award (PIA) in 2004. The PIA is an International balanced award programme of extra activities for young people between the ages of 14 – 25 years. It challenges young people through different activities such as community services, skills acquisition, adventurous journey and physical recreation, all geared towards the total development of the young person to be self-reliant. The scheme also guides them to be able to discover their talents and potentials necessary for development. Presently the programme has the following member of youth in the different categories.

- Bronze	-	2276
- Silver	-	3328
- Gold	-	2252

In relation to culture and youth, there is a transition that the youth is the main transporters of culture – because they are the actor, the very mobile and highly prove to absorb new culture.

Clearly, it can be seen that the youth is very vulnerable to foreign culture and in African transformation cultural change therefore poses a big threat to social development. In present day world situation, social development cannot be achieved without economic development. And added to it is political development meaning that social development in effect is a blend or integrated approach that creates the potential for active participation.

3. Youth and Political Development

Youth can participate effectively in political development if they are capacitated, protected and adequately informed of their civic rights and also developmental issues.

In the area of conflict resolution young Gambian men and women have taken up the challenges without the involvement of any their party. Presently there are few youth associations for advocating for peace, such as Youth Ambassador of Peace, African Democracy and Good Governance, service for peace, and WANEP.

The government of the Gambia having taken cognizant of the important role youth play in the economic, political and social development of the country, has enshrined in the constitution fundamental rights protecting the young men and women. These include:

- Youth Participation:** Recognition that Gambia young men and women are an important and integral part of the national human resource capital, and as such they have a role and responsibility to participate fully in the decision making process as well as in nation building;
- Promotion of Equality:** Recognition of the rights and associated responsibilities of young Gambian men and women to equality of opportunity, equitable distribution of services and resources;
- Promotion of Human Rights:** Recognition of all human rights and fundamental freedoms without distinction as to religion, sex, ethnicity, language or any other forms of discrimination;
- Cultural Appreciation:** Recognition of the importance of the Gambia cultural heritage as a foundation for the nurturing of young men and women to project a distinct national character and values that will enable them to become responsible citizens;
- Promotion of Good Health:** Recognition that a healthy body and mind serves as a basis to youth development;
- Promotion of Youth Livelihood:** Recognition that access to sustainable livelihood by young men and women through access to gainful employment is a fundamental human right that every young man and woman in the Gambia is entitled to.

4. The African Youth Charter is a very comprehensive and the right document of the millennium for the generation of youth. In African Union should therefore facilitate its implementation by all member countries for it will impact positively on the lives of young people.

However, the Gambia is far ahead in the execution of the mandates of the Charter as we have already established a National Youth Council and formulated a National Youth Policy and Action Plan.

The government of the Gambia will continue to strengthen the existing structures for youth empowerment and ensure that capacities of young people are build as envisage in the African Youth Charter.