

GLOBALIZATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOURISM INDUSTRY IN THE GAMBIA: A PARTNERSHIP FOR EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

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The Gambia is one of the smallest countries in West Africa with a total land area of 10,689 square kilometers (km). It stretches 350 km inland from the West to East on either side of The River Gambia. The River Gambia, which runs the entire length of the country, divides it into two halves: the North and the South Banks. In 2003, the population was estimated to 1.4 million people with a population growth rate of 2.8% per annum resulting in one of the highest population densities in Africa: 128 persons per square kilometer (Provisional Census 2003 Results). Overall per capita income is approximately US\$320.00 per year. The Gambia is classified as one of the highly indebted poor countries.

Agriculture is the main economic activity. It accounts for the largest proportion of economically active persons with more than half of the population engaged in subsistence farming, livestock rearing and groundnut cultivation. Groundnut is the main cash crop but efforts to diversify have brought in sesame growing, which is predominantly grown by women. Rice is the staple food but the country has not yet reached self-sufficiency in rice production. In addition to agriculture, tourism and commerce are important sources of foreign exchange as well as of employment.

1. The Growth of Tourism in The Gambia, and its Potential Benefits for Development

In the 20th Century, the tourism industry experienced a boom with the adoption of the airplane as the preferred mean of transportation. It greatly reduced travel time from Europe to the global south. Postwar affluence in the global north and the adoption of guaranteed holidays with pay gave people the time off and the money to travel. Travel agencies and tour operators sprang up to package and promote vacations in a variety of sunny places. They popularized the idea of winter vacations in “exotic” tropical places and helped bring such travels within the price range of middle-income families.

In The Gambia, tourism is second only to agriculture in its place in the economy. Its contribution to monetary GDP is targeted to increase from an estimated 13% in 2004 to around 18% by 2020, which implies that tourism will grow considerably faster than other sectors of the economy (See the Gambia Tourism Development Master Plan or GTDMP 2006: 8). It is a major source of foreign exchange, and is vital given that as of 2004 the net current account deficit (excluding official transfers) was an estimated US\$59 million. Thus the need to earn foreign exchange is a top priority.

Tourism-generated employment is projected to increase from an estimated 16,000 jobs in 2004 to around 35,000 jobs in 2020. The employment figures are for full-time jobs, or full-time job equivalents in the case of persons (e.g. tour guides, souvenir vendors) who may derive only part of their income from tourism. The total number of persons either fully or partly dependent on tourism as a source of livelihood is therefore greater than the employment figures alone would suggest.

Overall, the development of tourism in The Gambia has been a long-term “success story” for around forty years. While there may be debates about issues such as the distribution of benefits, social impacts and environmental changes, there is no doubt

that the contribution from the macro-economic viewpoint—foreign exchange, value added for GDP, employment, local incomes, etc.—has had a major beneficial effect in a small economy. More importantly, tourism still has the potential to make a major contribution to the Government's efforts to grow the Gambian economy, and to help address issues such as poverty reduction.

The Government has been supporting the development of tourism. It recently created the Gambia Tourism Authority (GTA), a government agency in charge of managing, and planning further expansion of the industry. The Government received International Development Assistance (IDA) and United Nations Development Program (UNDP) assistance to build a road network linking the hotels, the airport and the main urban centers. More recently, the Kombo Coastal road was built with a loan of US\$ 8.5 million from the Kuwait Fund and US\$ 6 million from BADEA.

There is a consensus in The Gambia to consider that in the present situation, any durable economic development must involve the development of the tourism industry. Various government agencies have for objective to spread wider the benefits that come from the development of that industry. They would like to double or more the number of tourism-related jobs in both the formal and informal sectors. While the formal sector is mostly represented by the bigger stakeholders in the industry, the Gambian Hotel Association (GHA) and the Tourism and Travel Association (TTA), the informal sector—those individuals and micro-enterprises which engage with tourists and the tourism industry but are not members of the GHA or the TTA—are mostly members of the Association of Small Scale Enterprises in Tourism (ASSET).

According to the GTDMP, the development of the tourism industry (the increase in number of visiting tourists and the multiplication of tourism products) is the only option that the Gambian government has to face the population growth, the increasing need of foreign currencies and of higher government revenues.

2. The Problems of the Tourism Industry in The Gambia

The current situation of the tourism industry in The Gambia is not deprived of problems, which must be resolved if the industry is to fully bring benefits to the Gambian economy and to the population in general. The proposed partnership between Florida International University (FIU) and the University of the Gambia (UTG) has for main objective to provide the UTG with the means to address the problems listed below as many challenges for the country's development.

The industry is characterized by a capital flight or non-arrival of capital: The multiplication of all-inclusive packages sold in European countries does not result in the arrival of capital in The Gambia since most of the Euros or British Pounds paid by tourists remain in the countries in which the packages were purchased.

There is a high rate of import of the products needed by the industry: Many of the big companies that construct the all-inclusive resorts and beach hotels do not purchase the products they need (from construction materials to food)—or only minimally—on the local markets, but import them from overseas.

The upper and middle management in the tourism industry are often in the hands of foreigners and only have a marginal Gambian representation. This situation points to the country's continued lack of an educated labor force that could play a major role in the development of the industry. Following the decision of government authorities to put

tourism education on top of its list of priorities, the Hotel School was built to train young Gambians in Hotel and Hospitality Management. In recent times, institutions like the International Business College (IBC) and the International College of Business Administration and Human Resources and Development (ICOBABRD) were also created. However, as of now, these institutions can only award certificates and diplomas given the inferior academic levels of their students. That is to say, they only recruit students who do not have the grades and education background to pursue a university degree. Now that the need for more responsible tourism has become urgent, the mandate of the UTG has been extended from undertaking modules on tourism education to offering a full academic degree program in hotel and tourism management.

The tourism industry has a negative impact on the environment. That impact should be carefully studied if it is to be controlled and remedied.

The country continues to be characterized by a poor infrastructure (dirt roads, unreliable running water delivery and electricity interruptions, etc.), which limits the attractiveness of the products the country has to offer and ultimately augment their costs.

The industry has a great impact on the traditional social and cultural values of the country. This is an area that needs more in-depth research.

There is a need for market diversification. Currently, tourism in The Gambia mostly consists in beach goers who have little interest in engaging in other activities or to visit the countryside. There is great potential for further development in areas such as eco-tourism, cultural tourism, water sports activities, etc. These could, in turn, contribute to the spreading of income derived from tourism in rural areas.

The industry has only marginally penetrated the American, Chinese, Indian, and Latin American (Brazil, Mexico) markets—countries with either a sizeable or a fast growing middle class. According to the GTDMP, the vast majority of tourists come from the U.K., the Netherlands, Scandinavian countries, and the rest of Western Europe. Any expansion will require a savvy product branding and marketing. Direct charter or regular flights to possible markets should be established and expanded. Currently, the flights arriving in Banjul's international airport only depart from Europe (Belgium, Spain, Germany, and the U.K.). An expansion in the American and Latin American markets requires direct flights from the U.S. Miami International Airport has been cited as a possible departure point from the U.S. The flight Miami-Banjul would last for less than seven hours. Currently, any U.S. tourist who wants to go to The Gambia must transit through Western Europe, which considerably increases the flying time: an inconvenience that accordingly discourages U.S. based tourists and limits their number.

3. The Objectives of the Partnership Between the University of The Gambia (UTG) and Florida International University (FIU)

The key personnel of both universities who are behind this proposal and their respective colleagues who will be involved in the needs assessment plan and strategic planning process either in Banjul and/or in Miami agree on the ultimate objectives of this partnership.

Following electronic communication between FIU and the UTG in the fall 2008, Dr. Jean Rahier, the U.S. partnership director, traveled to The Gambia in December 2008/January 2009 in order to explore with UTG colleagues their interest in engaging in a partnership with FIU. He held a series of meetings with UTG colleagues during which enthusiasm for the initiative grew while the partnership's objectives were drawn and

discussed at length. During this trip, Dr. Rahier also met with key stakeholders in the Gambian tourism industry: The Department of State for Tourism and Culture, The Gambian Tourism Authority (GTA), and the Gambia Hotel Association. They all expressed their “unwavering” and “ardent” support for the partnership and its objectives (see the attached letters of support), which unambiguously demonstrates several things: the commitment of the national government of The Gambia for the development of higher education and research, particularly in the area of hotel and tourism management; and the intention of the partnership’s leadership to actively involve the private sector in the needs assessment and strategic planning process.

The objectives of the partnership are:

1. To contribute to the development of the tourism industry in a way that will benefit all stakeholders who reside in The Gambia, in the formal and informal sectors, male and female, as well as to those in rural areas who still have to gain anything from that industry.
2. To build the capacity of the UTG to develop education and research programs to remedy the lack of a university educated labor force that could play a major role in middle and upper management in the industry, both in hotel management and as policy makers for the industry (in government agencies, marketing activities, etc.). To this end, the key objective is to engage, in the short run, in the development of a Bachelor of Arts in Hotel and Tourism Management, which should have an original curriculum aimed at emphasizing the importance of the diversification of the industry in the country, at maximizing the economic benefits of the industry for the national economy and the national population, and at minimizing its negative environmental impact. Such

curriculum should also expose students to the rich social sciences scholarship on the various kinds of tourism that has developed around the world and give them the opportunity to participate in social sciences and environmental research projects on tourism in the Gambia. Such research projects should be housed at the UTG to fully benefit students enrolled in the B.A. in hotel and tourism management, but also to other students enrolled in “traditional” social sciences tracks. Most curricula for degrees in hotel and tourism management usually do not include an exposure to such scholarship. FIU counts with both a series of units and Departments that are well known for engaging in such research, and with a world-renown School of Hospitality and Tourism Management (<http://hospitality.fiu.edu/>). In the long run, the partnership could lead to the development of a Master degree program in hotel and tourism management. Graduates from such a program of study will be pivotal in securing the development of a tourism industry that will produce economic and financial benefits that will remain in the country and profit the Gambian population.

3. During the planning phase, the partners will explore the ways in which the experiences and knowledge of the FIU social sciences faculty, experts in both qualitative and quantitative research, and school of hospitality and tourism management faculty (on product branding and tourism marketing) could contribute to faculty development at the UTG through exchanges and collaborations, and through the establishing at the UTG of a research lab to conduct the necessary surveys and other quantitative and qualitative research on tourism, tourists, and the Gambian population. The idea is to avoid the simple reproduction of the curricula of degrees offered at FIU, but instead to design an original curriculum that will suit the specific realities of the Gambian and West African

contexts, and respond to the preoccupation of Gambian policy makers to have the tourism industry contribute more fully to the actual economic development of the nation.

4. To seek the mobilization of the Gambian diaspora in the global north (mostly in the U.S. and the U.K., but also in Sweden and Germany) and call for their investments in, and support for, the various specific initiatives that the partners will engage in. This engagement of the Diaspora could contribute to the expansion of revenues for the UTG, and to economic and financial arrangements that would better benefit The Gambia and its population by keeping financial benefits in the country through reinvestments and other means.

5. To actively seek the increased participation of women in both the education and research aspects of the partnership through not only the establishment of programs of support and scholarship that will specifically target women, but also through the incorporation of recent scholarship in women and gender studies into the curriculum. Partners will seek the active participation of the FIU Women Studies Center (WSC) and of its faculty members (see the attached letter of support from the FIU WSC's Director). In the needs assessment period, we will also engage actively and meet with Gambian women organizations, such as the Gambia Business and Professional Women (GBPW), The Gambia National Women's Council and National Women's Bureau, the Gambia Women's Finance Association (GWFA), the Women in Service Development Organization & Management (WISDOM), and the Women's Bureau, as well as with representatives of governmental organizations such as the Ministry of Health, Social Welfare and Women's Affairs. We will seek their advice and their participation in the

needs assessment and strategic planning process and in subsequent phases of the partnership.

6. To work towards the improvement of teaching and research facilities at the UTG. A special emphasis will be made on the upgrading of the two computer labs the UTG now has and the addition of new ones, and on the connections to the World Wide Web throughout the UTG buildings. Specialists of FIU's University Technology Services will be included in the FIU team involved in the needs assessment plan and strategic planning process, and in the partnership that will follow. The enhancement of these equipments will allow the collaboration of FIU faculty through the sharing of a series of online courses that could be developed in collaboration with UTG faculty, which could also be made available to UTG students after having been downloaded onto the UTG computer network.

7. The partnership will seek the institutionalized participation of, or linkages with, the private sector (GHA, TTA, and others); the public sector (the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Education, the GTA); local, regional and global NGOs that have a specific interest in tourism (ASSET, the U.N. agency World Tourism Organization, Tourism Concern, the European Centre for Eco Agro Tourism, the International Institute for Peace through Tourism, the International Ecotourism Society, etc.); and rural Gambian communities that could benefit from or that have already engaged in alternative forms of community tourism. These linkages could also increase the revenues of the UTG.

8. To ultimately make of the program of education and research at the center of this partnership a model for the sub-region. In that way, the UTG's B.A. in Hotel and

Tourism Management could attract students from throughout West Africa. During the planning period, the partners will discuss the possibility of organizing an international conference on tourism in Sub-Saharan Africa for which they could seek the participation of policy makers and government agencies' administrators, as well as tourism studies scholars. During Dr. Rahier's December 2008/January 2009 trip, the idea of organizing such a conference received enthusiastic support, and the possibility of expanding the geographic scope of the conference to Africa and the Caribbean or to the African diaspora in general was discussed in view of Caribbean countries' longer experiences with tourism, from which continental Africans could profit.

9. To benefit FIU students and faculty, through exchanges and collaborations in this partnership, by increasing their knowledge of socio-economic and cultural West African realities.