

A warm and working relationship

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DAVID MORLEY has been British High Commissioner in Banjul since May 2011. Since joining the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1973 he has served in a wide variety of posts overseas, particularly in Africa. Previous to his appointment to The Gambia he served in Tristan da Cunha, a British Overseas Territory in the South Atlantic.

As 47-year old President Jammeh begins his fourth term of office after last year's notably peaceful Presidential election, remarkable for its very large turnout, this is an appropriate moment in which to take stock of the Republic of The Gambia's options for further economic and developmental progress.

In wondering how this tiny West African country has, over the last few years, delivered growth figures (accompanied by manageable debt) of which many, much richer, western countries would be proud, one has to first acknowledge The Gambia's admirable strengths in the face of so many challenges – be they physical, geographical, regional or infrastructural.

First and foremost is a peaceful, ordered and self-disciplined community whose people, be they Muslim or Christian, Jolla or Mandinka, wealthy or poor, regard themselves as one family. Many ordinary Gambians, especially those in rural areas, have to work extremely hard to raise their families and earn a living. Jobs can be hard to find, especially outside the tourist season. Access to healthcare and education is not straightforward.

Despite all these difficulties the Gambian people's sense of national pride stands out and does them great credit. For example, pride in their President's and government's achievements. Pride in the excellent performance of the Gambian Armed Forces (GAF) and Police Service contribution to the UN Peace Support Operation in Darfur. And also in individual successes. The recent appointment of a Gambian lady as Chief Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court (ICC), in the face of strong international competition, struck a notable chord across the entire country. This admirable trait, when coupled with the extremely attractive interpersonal nature of the people, helps to explain why so many international tourists return here year after year and why so many foreigners regard The Gambia as home.

In seeking to create the right conditions for growth and investment, President Jammeh and his ministers are pursuing an ambitious agenda of developmental stimulus and growth, greater investment in infrastructure (especially IT and communications) as well as adopting focussed programmes designed to improve basic healthcare and education services. The Gambian Government works closely with the relevant resident UN agencies, IMF and EU on these sectors,

and while its targets may look ambitious to some, the government's record since 2007 stands for itself.

If there remains one barrier, above all, to progress in The Gambia, which would benefit from attention, it could be the legal sector. No country can boast that its legislation is either entirely appropriate or thoroughly up to date. But foreign investors, especially those who are inexperienced in the region, need to feel confident that they can enjoy access to a robust and independent judiciary.

The government's challenges are significant. It is noteworthy how government strategists have looked at different options when considering how to generate the capacity they need to make sustainable progress. Partnerships with foreign NGOs, institutions and volunteers are key, and prove extremely effective, especially at the grassroots level. Many rural communities across the country can demonstrate 30-40 year relationships with British and other international partners. Both VSO and the US Peace Corps do great work here and their volunteers can testify to the huge satisfaction and pleasure to be gained from helping local people to improve their quality of life. And another admirable national quality is that no one takes any of this support for granted – President Jammeh himself frequently acknowledges these vital contributions to the Republic's developmental progress.

One area which is sensibly attracting dynamic promotion here is the tourism sector. 40,000 thousand British tourists every year can't all be wrong. Tourism in The Gambia is a relatively new industry. But hard work and imagination have turned a potentially challenging part of the African continent into The Smiling Coast. The Gambia offers visitors a wide choice of hospitality, much of it outstanding. This can range from the buzz of the hotels, casinos, restaurants and bars of the Senegambia Strip to the perhaps less frenetic but equally enjoyable amenities at Cape Point.

The UK/Gambia relationship is currently warm at all levels. Occasionally there can be disagreements between us, but these are generally resolved pretty quickly. What helps is that the UK shares and endorses President Jammeh's aspirations for his country. The UK wants to see a prosperous and secure Gambia and very much supports President Jammeh and his Government in their efforts to deliver an improved quality of life for the Gambian people.