

Working towards Vision 20/20

INTERVIEW WITH **HE DOCTOR YAHYA JAMMEH**

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE GAMBIA

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Following your fourth consecutive win in elections in November, what are your goals and ambitions for the next five years?

We will continue to work on our long-term development goals, which are outlined in Vision 20-20, and which aim to make The Gambia a middle income country over the next decade. That may sound like a tall order, but we want nothing less than the best for The Gambian people: we want this country to follow the example of states such as Dubai, which have grown beyond all expectations when compared to just a few decades ago. I also look to countries like Canada and what it has achieved in terms of having the highest living standards in the world. I think that The Gambia, as a very small country, should be able to beat Canada. To achieve our goals we will really have to work hard. We will need all hands on deck, not only Gambians, but of course the help and input of the international investment community.

What unique strengths does The Gambia offer the global investment community?

The Gambia is a peaceful and stable democracy with a strategic location in West Africa. We are just six hours by plane from Europe. The country has tremendous potential to develop small-scale manufacturing and processing, particularly in the agricultural sector. Investors coming here can make use of The Gambia's unused export quotas for North America and Europe. Our exports are still largely restricted to textiles. We offer many incentives, as well as a World Bank funded *Trade Gateway Project* which is under-utilised and allows for tax free exports for certain industries.

The Gambia has made great strides over the last two decades, but has still been slow to attract investment. How do you account for this?

There are several factors that have to be borne in mind. One is the fact that we had a problem, a chronic problem, with electricity supply, which we have now overcome. I also think that we have not been efficient in marketing our investment projects. But with the electricity problem solved we can guarantee investors reliable, affordable supply, and we can discuss their needs with them before they commit to a project.

Which are the priority sectors that have been identified for overseas investment?

Over the next five years investment in agriculture will be given priority. This sector will be the main basis for economic growth. The strategy is to begin adding value to agricultural produce, so that farmers can obtain better prices for their products. We are looking for investment in processing agricultural products, rather than just exporting raw materials.

We are moving away from a subsistence model in the agriculture sector towards commercial farming, and this means diversification. This has seen us focus, for example, on sugar for export and also for the domestic market. Rather than the government running the sugar industry, we believe that this is something the private sector can do better. One company that I would highlight as an illustration of this approach to working with the private sector is Kharafi, a major company with export capacity beyond meeting the needs of the domestic market. With our proximity to European markets, there is tremendous potential to diversify into fresh vegetables and other products that can be flown quickly to European markets.

If we offer help to farmers to move away from subsistence production, then agriculture can become a source of employment and we can begin to develop SMEs in the agri-processing sector. We want to make agriculture attractive to young people, to create an environment where one can make a good living from agriculture. This is one of our key agriculture priorities.

There is no country in the world with the array of incentives that we offer. We see the agricultural sector growing in tandem with tourism. Let me give you an example: we still have to import butter to supply hotels. We have cattle here, and we have the potential to develop a dairy products market. What we need is know-how; we need inward investors to establish local processing plants to supply the expanding tourism industry, for example.

What other areas of the economy do you see playing a role in driving economic growth?

We need to develop our tourism industry, through diversification. We will continue to develop conventional tourism, but we also want to look at niche sectors, such as eco-tourism, sports tourism and

Opposite:
HE Doctor Yahya Jammeh

conference tourism. We are focusing on developing a sustainable tourism industry, this means developing more upscale tourism; we are particularly interested in attracting investors who want to build high-end resorts.

Focusing on tourism, and your plans to attract more upscale visitors, are you seeing growing interest from potential developers?

We are beginning to see growing interest from hotel developers. For the moment investors are still mainly looking at building resorts along the Atlantic Coast, but we want to encourage developers to take a look at our islands: there are more than 500 islands in the mouth of the River Gambia, this area is still very much the unknown Gambia, and is particularly appropriate for low-impact, sustainable and eco-tourism projects. The River Gambia is a paradise.

We need to offer a wide range of tourist activities because our year is still relatively short: during the wet season, between July and November, it rains for a couple of hours a day, and although the country suddenly becomes green, attracting a wide range of birds and other animals, such as hippos, it has to be said that our safari camps are not yet of a standard to attract high-end visitors. This is where island tourism could fill a gap. If you look at Indonesia, most of the big resorts, the world-class resorts, are on islands. We want people to come and make use of the islands here, these are wonderful islands. In short we want to develop facilities other than just beach hotels. We want golf courses where major tournaments can be held, along with yachting marinas, of course, and water sports.

And what is your policy regarding developing the hotel sector, both on the coast and along the river?

We already have a number of world-class hotels, and thanks to government policy we will see a growing number. Our priority is no longer three star hotels; our goal now is to develop the five star sector: we have to look to the future. We have to provide more facilities and more things for visitors to do. This is a very volatile market that is subject to changing economic conditions; as we can see, it can also be affected by climatic conditions, and of course by political events: it cannot be taken for granted. Being competitive is not just about prices, but about the facilities a hotel has to offer. At the end of the day the quality of service, the quality of the hotel is what makes the difference. We are also aware that to achieve our goals we will have to invest in training hotel staff to international standards.

The Gambia is not among the big five African destinations, in terms of

animals, so we will have to work harder than ever to attract tourists by offering a wide range of facilities, activities, and services. Tourists will need a continuous development of new attractions if they are to return here year after year. Visitors want to see variety. So we want to really diversify and improve our facilities and our services. This means making the most of what is unique about The Gambia, which is the river, and its islands, as much as the coast. River transport here is still very basic, so I would just add that by developing the river we can also offer local people opportunities to start transport companies, as well of course as encouraging domestic tourism, because there are people here who would like to make better use of the river for holidays and weekends.

Turning to the wider issue of generating jobs, perhaps you could briefly explain the Government's programme for accelerated job creation?

At the core of the programme is improving education and in improving our skills base. This goes way beyond the simple literacy programmes of the past, and takes us into the digital era, where people can use the internet to inform themselves about important issues and to develop current knowledge.

Education has to be focused on what the country needs if it is to grow. We need people with skills, people who can move the economy forward. This is about technology. As you know, the Africa Coast to Europe (ACE) submarine telecommunications cable, which has now landed in The Gambia, will come into operation this year. This will make a huge difference to education; it will open up huge possibilities, and expose people to the potential of

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Declan Hartnett,
Regional Publisher of
FIRST with HE President
Jammeh of The Gambia

technology. I believe that this will enable us to produce a new generation of highly skilled young people, of engineers, teachers, doctors and scientists. Over the next five years we aim to produce at least 1,000 science graduates and 2,000 engineers. The time has come to end dependence on aid and people returning from abroad: if we want to really build a country with a sustainable economy we must create a new generation able to take the country forward. This is no longer about the need to eradicate poverty. It is not employment for the sake of employment, which all too often in the past has meant that people continue to live from hand to mouth. We want to create quality employment which will ensure a standard of living that can match the best on the planet.

By committing ourselves to improving education, and with it creating jobs that will boost living standards, we believe that we can attract investment from overseas; that investors will see that we are serious, and take part in this project. We want the private sector to have a stake in this, and with a well-trained workforce, we believe that the private sector will want to be involved. The private sector needs skilled people. The government is prepared to take the lead in initiating public private partnerships.

You mentioned attracting back Gambians who have moved abroad. With the economic downturn in much of Europe and North America, is the time right for Gambians to bring their skills home?

We are in touch with the diaspora, and we regularly hold conferences about the opportunities here. At the same time, we have to be realistic. There are the

issues of wages and lifestyle expectations. Monthly wages here are considerably lower than Gambians are used to earning abroad, and many are shocked when they realise that a monthly wage of say, US\$200 is considered generous here. Of course purchasing power in The Gambia is much greater than in Europe or the United States. This is a developing country, and some sacrifice is required to build it. We welcome Gambians who have lived abroad, we also welcome other Africans, and people from Europe if they believe they can play a role in developing this country.

Turning to the petroleum sector, how optimistic are you about the prospects for important oil or gas discoveries in The Gambia?

I am very optimistic that we have petroleum and in large quantities. Regarding participation in exploration and development, we are open to all bids, we are not restricting anybody: we have the legislation in place, so the terms and conditions are clear. Above all, we want this to be a win-win situation. One thing I would say is that over the last ten years I have noticed that the large petroleum players hang around and see the small players either burn their fingers or hit a jackpot and then they come in. But as I said, we have no restrictions as to who comes in. Interested parties should put their cards on the table, and we'll put our cards on the table – there are no restrictions.

What is your message to the international community?

The Gambia is a developing country, which means, that with its strategic location, it offers huge opportunities, and not just in the sectors we have mentioned: we have mineral resources as well.

Overall, I think that anybody who has visited always highlights the great hospitality of the Gambian people. This is a society where people are honest and hard working, as well as wanting to live in peace. We are tolerant: we have had no political or tribal, or religious conflict. Muslims and Christians live in peace. Gambians are very accommodating. This is a country where you can do business without being harassed because of who you are, the colour of your skin, or your religion. The Gambia is unique in this regard, anybody who knows Africa and has spent time here knows that. We may be small but the opportunities in this country are huge as we move rapidly into the 21st Century. Our goal is to achieve broad socio-economic development by improving living conditions and education: in a decade this country will still be recognisable as The Gambia, but we would have made huge improvements. So in conclusion, I would invite you to be part of our development story, because it's going to be an extraordinary story.

