

# Gambians see sharp decline in emigration, though interest in leaving remains high

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 266 | Charles Ebere

## Summary

Migration is a high-profile issue in the Gambia, especially irregular low-skilled emigration beyond the borders of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Zanker & Altrogge, 2017). Yahya Jammeh's 22-year autocratic regime, characterized by poverty and poor governance, triggered a wave of irregular emigration – especially by young Gambians – to Europe, a phenomenon known locally as “the back way” (Embericos, 2016).

In 2016, nearly 12,000 Gambians arrived in Italy via the Mediterranean, a 36% increase from 2015 (Hunt, 2017). The alarming rate of emigration placed the Gambia among the top five nations in the number of citizens who cross the Mediterranean from Libya to Italy (International Organization for Migration, 2017) – a remarkable fact considering the country's population of just 2.1 million.

During the 18 months after Jammeh's departure in early 2017, 2,674 Gambian migrants trapped in Libya were assisted to return to the Gambia with support from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the European Union (Hunt, 2018). The government has also prioritized creating jobs and training opportunities in a bid to reduce unemployment among young people (Hunt, 2017).

Afrobarometer's maiden national survey in the Gambia reveals that while an overwhelming majority of citizens say that irregular migration has declined in the past year, almost six in 10 citizens have considered emigrating – most often in hopes of finding employment. Almost half of Gambians also say rural-urban migration within the country has increased. A majority of Gambians say they encounter difficulties in crossing international borders to work and trade within the sub-region despite the ECOWAS Protocol of 1979 establishing unimpeded movement of people, goods, and services.

## Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2016, and findings from Round 7 surveys (2016/2018) are currently being released.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in the Gambia, led by the Centre for Policy, Research and Strategic Studies (CepRass), interviewed 1,200 adult Gambians in July and August 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

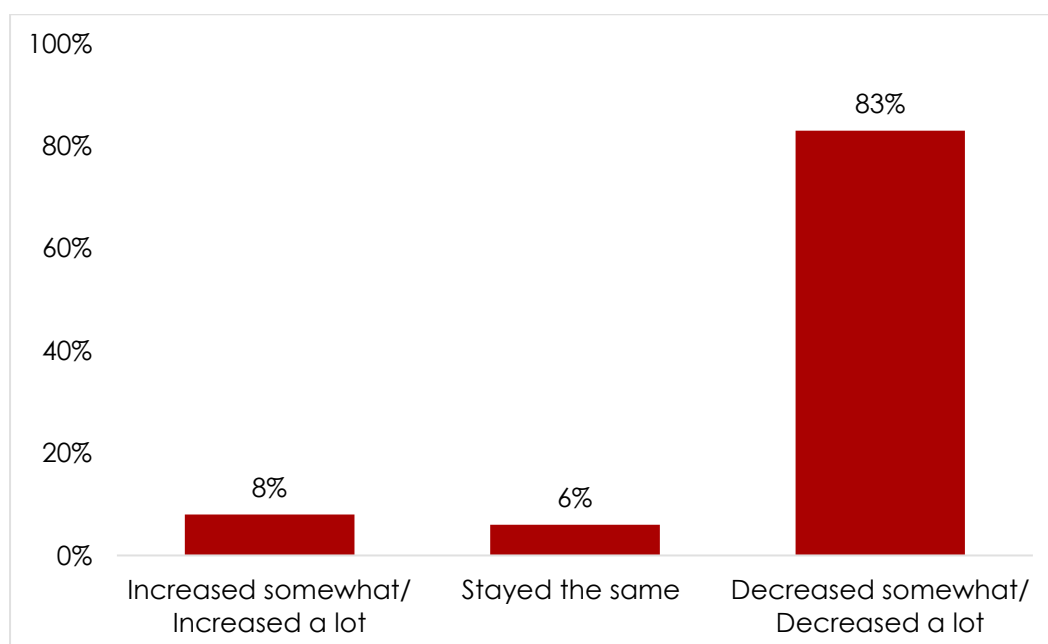
## Key findings

- More than eight in 10 Gambians (83%) say irregular migration to other countries decreased during the year preceding the survey, including 51% who say it decreased “a lot.”
- Almost half (44%) of respondents say migration from rural to urban areas within the Gambia has increased.
- A majority (56%) of Gambians say they have considered emigrating, including 29% who say they have given “a lot” of thought to the idea.
- Among those who have considered emigrating, one in 10 (11%) say they are taking concrete steps to emigrate, such as seeking a visa, while 66% say they have not made specific plans yet.
- The most common reasons for considering emigration are to find work (39%) and to escape economic hardship (29%).
- The most popular destinations for potential emigrants are Europe (47%) and North America (38%).
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of Gambians say it is difficult for people to cross international borders to work or trade in other West African countries.

## Irregular migration out of the Gambia

An overwhelming majority (83%) of Gambians believe that the rate of irregular emigration decreased in the 12 months preceding the survey, including a majority (51%) who say it decreased “a lot” (Figure 1).

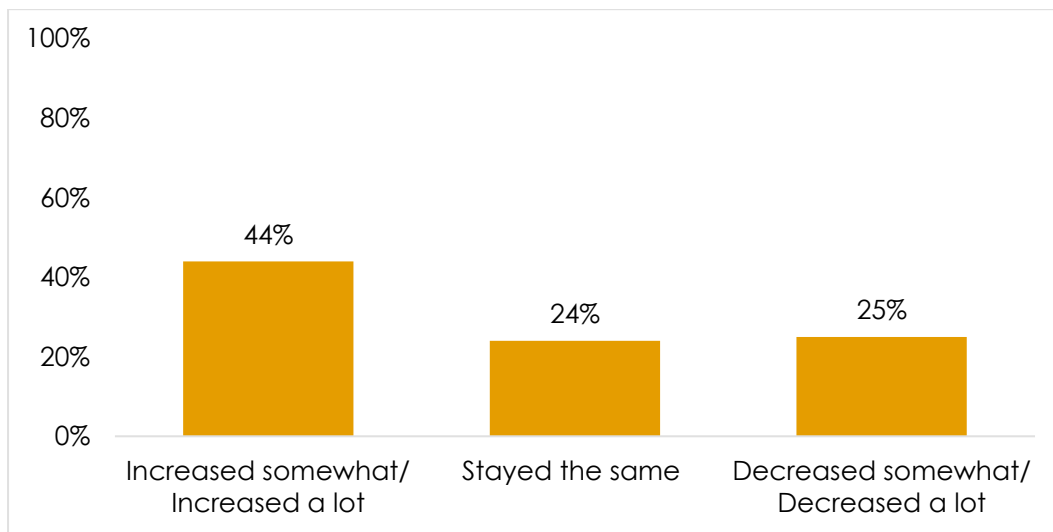
**Figure 1: Irregular migration** | The Gambia | 2018



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, would you say the following have increased, stayed the same or decreased compared to a year ago: Irregular migration or back way?*

When asked about their perception of rural-to-urban migration in the Gambia, almost half (44%) of respondents say it has increased over the previous 12 months, while the other half believe it has decreased (25%) or remained the same (24%) (Figure 2). The perception that people are moving from the countryside to the cities is strong in spite of rural development initiatives such as rural electrification projects undertaken by both the previous and present administrations in an attempt to improve life and opportunities in rural areas and to curb the rural exodus (Senghore-Njie, 2010). It may also reflect the fact that many rural youth move to urban centers to pursue higher education (Jawneh, 2008).

**Figure 2: Rural-urban migration | The Gambia | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, would you say the following have increased, stayed the same or decreased compared to a year ago: Internal rural to urban migration?*

### Gambians' desire to emigrate

A sizeable proportion of Gambians spend time abroad: Almost four in 10 (38%) say they or members of their household have lived outside the Gambia for at least three months during the past three years.

In addition, a majority (56%) of Gambians say they have considered emigrating, including 29% who say they have given "a lot" of thought to the idea. Among those who have

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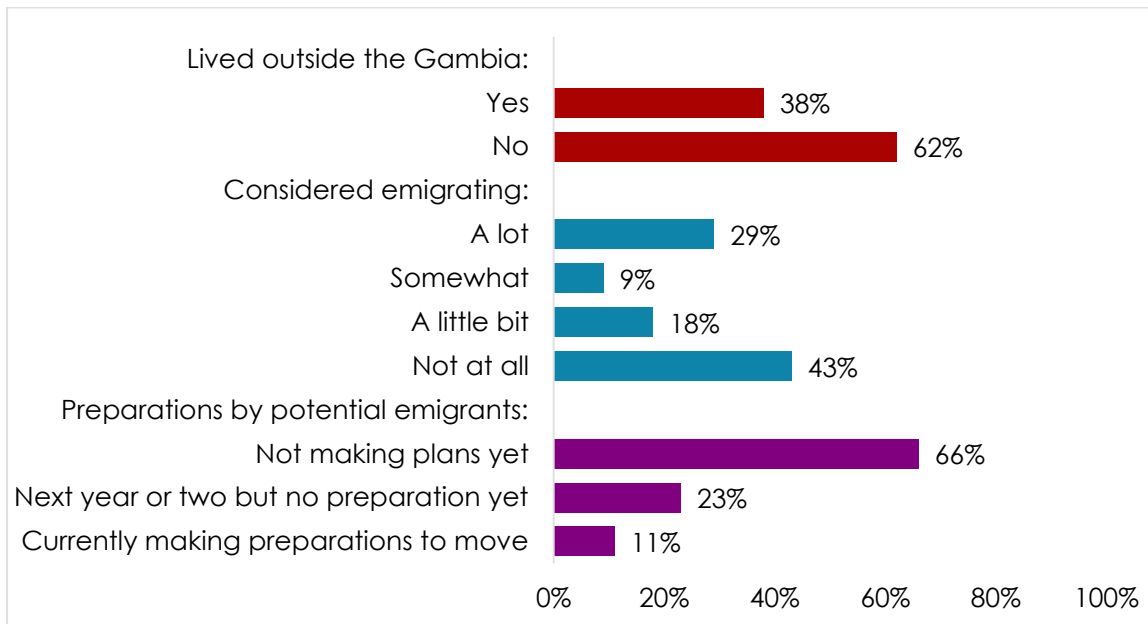
considered emigrating, about one in 10 (11%) say they are taking concrete steps to emigrate, such as seeking a visa; 23% plan to move in the next year or two but are not making preparations yet; and 66% say they have not made specific plans yet (Figure 3).

Men (59%) and rural residents (59%) are more likely to have considered emigration at least "a little bit" than women (52%) and city dwellers (54%) (Figure 4). Differences

between age groups are more pronounced: Two-thirds (67%) of young Gambians (aged 18-35 years) have considered emigration, compared to 47% of those aged 36-55 years and 30% of older citizens.

Citizens with at least a secondary education are also more likely to consider leaving the country than those with less schooling. Potential emigrants are most common in Central River-North (64%) and Central River-South (63%) and least common in Lower River (47%).

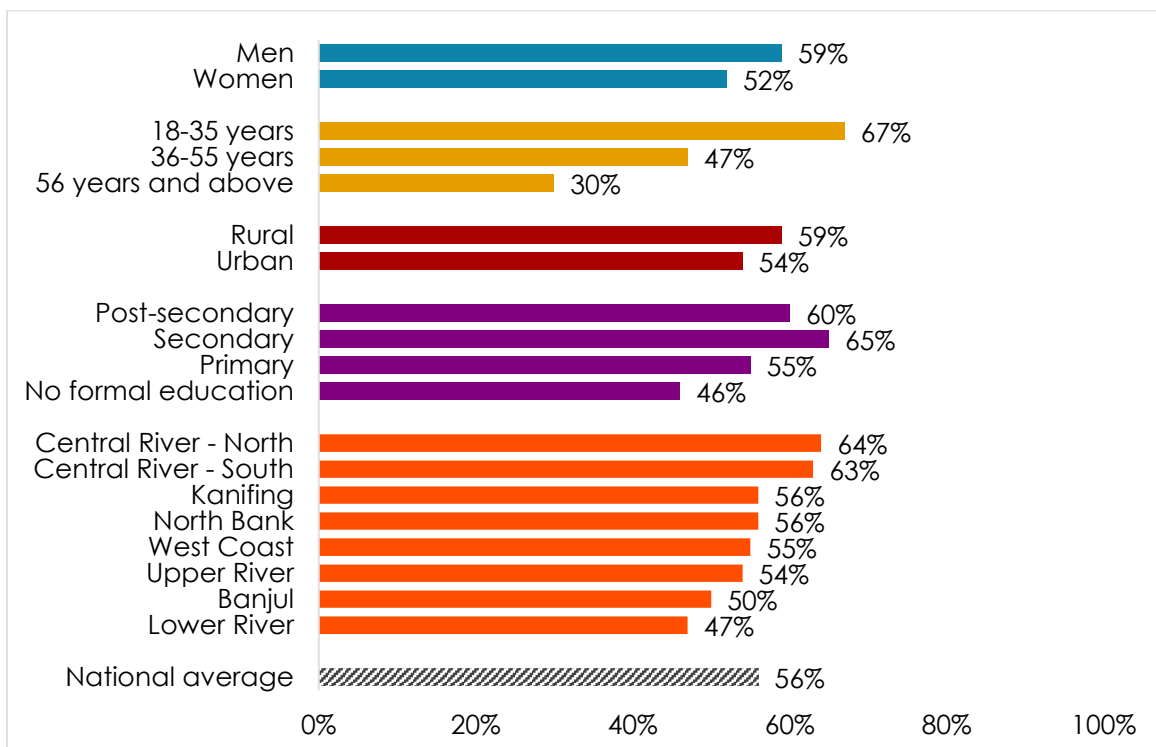
**Figure 3: Considered emigrating** | The Gambia | 2018



**Respondents were asked:**

- During the past three years, have you or anyone in your household gone to live in another country outside the Gambia for more than three months?
- How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?
- How much planning or preparation have you done in order to move to another country to live? (Asked only of respondents who said they had considered emigrating.)

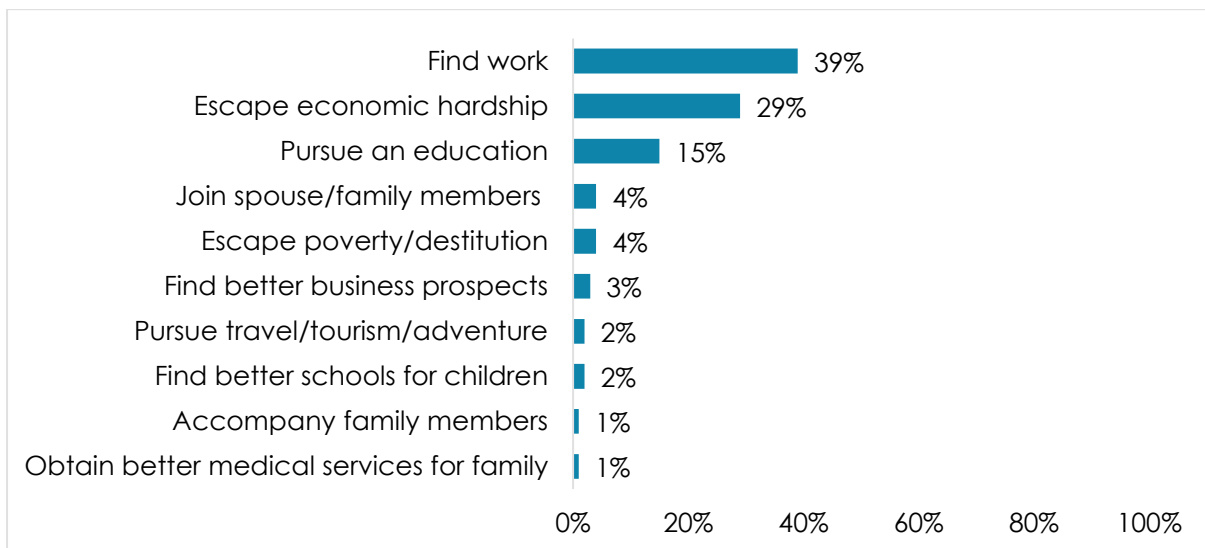
**Figure 4: Potential emigrants** | by socio-demographic group | The Gambia | 2018



**Respondents were asked:** How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live? (% who say "a lot," "somewhat," or "a little bit")

Among potential emigrants, the most common reasons for considering emigration are to find work (39%), to escape economic hardship (29%), and to pursue an education (15%) (Figure 5). Youth unemployment is a major concern in the Gambia. Recent estimates say that more than 40% of the country's youth are unemployed (Index Mundi, 2018), and youth unemployment is widely blamed as the root of social vices such as crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and prostitution as well as of illegal migration (National Youth Council, 2015). With support from the European Union's Youth Empowerment Project (YEP), the government is working to address the "economic root causes of illegal migration" (YEP, 2018).

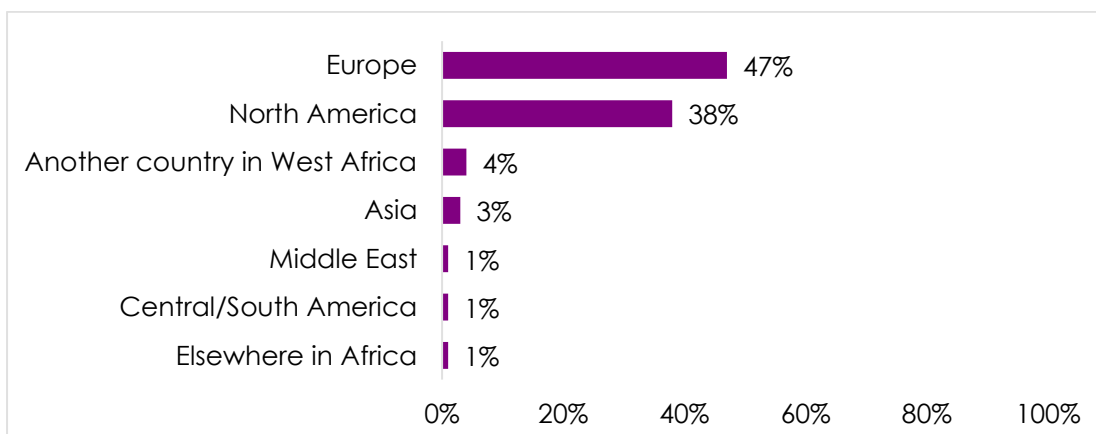
**Figure 5: Top 10 reasons for migrating | The Gambia | 2018**



**Respondents who said they had considered emigrating were asked:** What is the most important reason why you would consider moving from the Gambia?

Europe and North America are the most preferred destinations among potential emigrants. Almost half (47%) of respondents who have considered emigration say they would most likely move to Europe, while four in 10 (38%) prefer North America (Figure 6). Only one in 20 would prefer moving to another country in West Africa (4%) or elsewhere in Africa (1%).

**Figure 6: Preferred destination of potential emigrants | The Gambia | 2018**



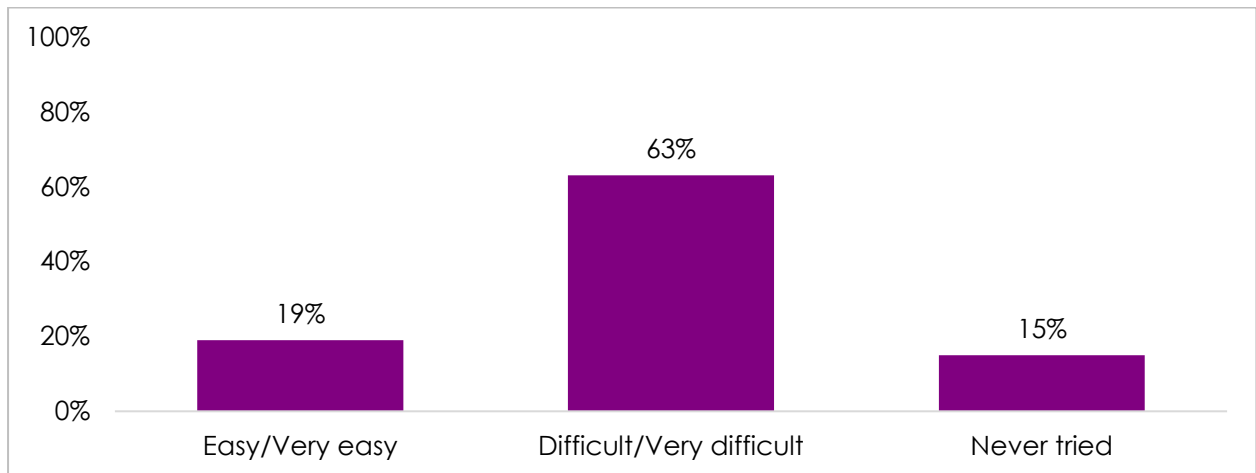
**Respondents who said they had considered emigrating were asked:** If you were to move to another country, where would you be most likely to go? (Figures exclude those who said they had not considered emigrating)

## Difficulties in crossing borders within ECOWAS

Gambians' low interest in intra-regional migration may be related in part to the difficulty they have in crossing West African borders. Barriers to movement across borders have been a major concern of regional and sub-regional organizations around the world (Aduloju, 2017). In West Africa, 39 years after the 1979 adoption of the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and the Right of Residence and Establishment, almost two-thirds (63%) of Gambians say it is "difficult" or "very difficult" to cross international boundaries within the sub-region for the purposes of work and business (Figure 7). Only two in 10 (19%) say it is "easy" or "very easy."

Other research has found difficulties associated with crossing borders ranging from road and administrative harassments and racketeering to intimidation and sexual harassment by border officials (Aduloju, 2017). In the first quarter of 2018, Gambian and Senegalese customs officials jointly pledged to form a customs union that would enable free movement of people and goods across the borders of the two countries (Nyockeh, 2018). Around the same time, Gambia's Ministry of Trade, Industry, Regional Integration and Employment collaborated with Senegal's Ministry of African Integration, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and Francophonie to observe the first-ever Senegambia Free Movement Day, hoping to create awareness of the issue of free movement within the sub-region (Bah-Daffeh, 2018).

**Figure 7: Ease or difficulty of crossing international borders in West Africa | The Gambia | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, how easy or difficult is it for people in West Africa to cross international borders in order to work or trade in other countries, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

## Conclusion

Although many Gambians report a decrease in illegal migration, a majority of the population still think about moving abroad. Young and educated Gambians are particularly likely to have their eyes on Europe and North America, for reasons that confirm previous assumptions: to find jobs and economic opportunity. For policy makers charged with crafting effective responses to international and rural-to-urban migration, these findings provide added support for continuing, refining, and extending efforts to create an enabling environment for those with the energy, skills, and desire to pursue a better future.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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