



# GAMBIA'S HEALTH SECTOR

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# 1. Country Overview

The Gambia, officially known as the Republic of The Gambia, is a West African country bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and Senegal on the North, East, and South. The country is relatively small with a land area of 11,300 square kilometers and has a narrow Atlantic coastline <sup>[1]</sup>. The country's capital city is Banjul which also serves as a port city.

The country has a population size of 2,494,077. This is equivalent to 0.03 percent of the world's population which makes the country ranked 144 in the world in terms of population size. In The Gambia 59.4 percent of the population lives in urban areas and the median age is 17.8 years <sup>[2]</sup>.

The population consist of 99 percent by Africans, with Fula, Jola, Mandinka, Serahule, and Wolof as the main ethnic groups. Muslims in The Gambia constitute to 95.2 percent of the population Christians 4.2 percent. Gambians mostly speak English (official language), Mandinka, Wolof and Fula, in addition to other indigenous languages.

The Gambia gained its independence as a constitutional monarchy within Commonwealth in 1965 and it became a republic in 1970. In 1981, there was an unsuccessful coup d'état to overthrow the President Jawara. This was followed by Senegal and The Gambia signing the 1982 Treaty of Confederation which led to the creation of the Senegambia Confederation which integrated the two countries into one political and economical union. The confederation came to an end in 1989.

The Gambian Constitution was ratified in 1996 and went into effect in 1997. The current government is a multiparty republic, with the President as the Head of State and government. The President appoints the Vice President and cabinet ministers. The government has three branches: Judiciary, Executive, and Legislature.

In 2017, the government formulated the National Development Plan (2018 -2021) which aims to deliver good governance and accountability, social cohesion, and national reconciliation and to revitalize and transform the Gambia's economy <sup>[3]</sup>.

Below are the plan's strategic priorities:

- Governance, human rights, and decentralization
- Macroeconomic stabilization and economic management
- Modernized agriculture, agribusiness, and fisheries
- Human capital development – health, education, and social protection
- Infrastructure and energy
- Tourism and culture



- Youth empowerment
- Private sector development and trade

The Gambia is ranked 195th in terms of worldwide comparison of roads infrastructure. There is no significant railway system in the country<sup>[4]</sup>. There are several waterways and harbors with Banjul as the main port. There is one international airport in the country, and which is situated in Banjul.

The Gambia is a member of several regional and international trade agreements. The country is a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA). The country became a member of the United Nations in 1965.

The Gambia Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was approximately \$1.90 billion in 2020 with an average annual growth rate of zero percent according to a World Bank report. The country is classified as a low-income country. According to the 2021 Index of Economic Freedom, the country has an economic freedom score of 58.8 making its economy 104<sup>th</sup> freest in the world<sup>[5]</sup>.

## 1.1. Key Country Statistics



**62 years**

Life expectancy, at birth, 2019



**0.0 %**

GDP growth (annual %) in 2020



**20.6 %** Exports of goods and services as a percentage of GDP in 2019



**34.9 %** Imports of goods and services as percentage of GDP in 2019

*\*Source: World Bank*



Exported products: Rough Wood (**\$46.8M**), Coconuts, Brazil Nuts, and Cashews (**\$32.2M**), Sawn Wood (**\$15.4M**), 2019



Imported products: Light Pure Woven Cotton (**\$190M**), Refined Petroleum (**\$81M**), Rice (**\$60.1M**), 2019<sup>[6]</sup>



**Deficit of \$ 594.69M**<sup>[7]</sup>  
Balance of trade, 2020

## 2. Covid-19

As of 25<sup>th</sup> August 2021:

- Covid-19 positive cases: 9,470 ; Covid-19 deaths 301 and 9,049 recoveries.

*\*Source: Worldometer*

Despite the current Covid-19 surge in the country, many related restrictions have been lifted. Businesses, markets, schools, restaurants, bars, gyms, cinemas, and nightclubs have resumed operations. Borders have also been opened. Social distancing and mandatory wearing of masks in public are being reimplemented.

The country's Covid-19 vaccine rollout started in early March 2021. As of 20th August 2021, 9.3 percent of the population had been fully vaccinated and 10.5 percent had received at least one Covid-19 vaccine doses <sup>[8]</sup>.

### 3. Health Overview

The health system is largely affected by a high population growth rate, inadequate financing, limited trained health professionals, high poverty rate (48 percent of the population lives in poverty according to the World Food Programme (WFP)), and recent political instabilities. The situation has been worsened by the current Covid-19 surge. The Gambia has one of the lowest Human Development Indexes in the world with 0.496, which positions it at 172 out of 189 countries in the world according to UNDP 2019.

Despite the challenges, there is notable progress in terms of health indicators.:

- The prevalence of communicable diseases and malaria has eased in recent years.
- HIV/Aids affects less than 2 percent of the population (below other countries in the region).
- The total under-five mortality rates have been steadily reducing to 52 per 1000 live births in 2019.
- The life expectancy at birth is 62 years with females estimated to live longer than men. Life expectancy for females is 63 years where else for men is 61 years.
- The maternal mortality rate remains high: For every 10,000 births, 597 women died in 2019 <sup>[9]</sup>.

Ministry of Health (MOH) and the World Health Organization (WHO) in collaboration with other stakeholders have been working together to develop the National Health Policy (NHP) and National Strategic Plan (NSP) for 2021 to 2030. The NSP will be aligned with the national development plan and NHP will be anchored on WHO's framework of the six building blocks of health systems <sup>[10]</sup>. The country is also committed to attaining universal health coverage (UHC), all citizens have access to the country's healthcare delivery system.

The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MoHSW) is responsible for overall policy formulation, planning, organization, and coordination of the health sector. The public health system consists of three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary. The country's public health sector has 3 referral hospitals, 36 health facilities at the secondary level, and 492 health posts at the primary level <sup>[11]</sup>. There are several privately run health facilities in the country.

The current health expenditure as a percentage of GDP is relatively low as compared to other countries in Africa. The country depends largely on development assistance for health to finance health. Out of pocket and government health spending is expected to gradually increase with time.

According to the WHO 55 percent of deaths in Gambia are estimated to be caused by communicable, maternal, perinatal, and nutritional conditions, on the other hand, non-communicable diseases are estimated to account for 34 percent of all deaths in the country.

## The top ten causes of death are:



Lower respiratory  
infections



Ischemic  
heart disease



Neonatal  
disorders



HIV/AIDS



Stroke



Tuberculosis,



Malaria



Diarrheal diseases



Liver cancer



Cirrhosis

*\*Source: WHO*

## 3.1 Key Health Statistics



**3.09**

Current health  
expenditure as a  
% of GDP, 2018

**34.32**

Domestic private health  
expenditure as a % of current  
health expenditure, 2018

**30.59**

Domestic government health  
expenditure as a % of current  
health expenditure, 2018



**29.34**

Out-of-pocket expenditure as a %  
of current health expenditure, 2018



**52**

Under 5 mortality rate  
(per 1,000 live births), 2019

*\*Source: World Bank*

## 4. Challenges in the Private Health Sector


- Weak regulatory environment
- Poor access to credit and limited healthcare financing
- Limited skilled health workforce
- Poor infrastructure and transport network
- High population growth rate; high fertility rate
- The high maternal mortality rate
- High poverty levels

## 5. Opportunities in the Private Health Sector

- Boosting current efforts targeted to improve RMNCH
- More health specialists and experts need to be trained to reinforce the current health workforce.
- Access to healthcare in rural, vulnerable, and resource-limited areas is still a challenge. More innovative health programs which target these areas are needed.
- The NSP for 2021-2030, brings the opportunity to foster partnerships between development partners, the private sector, and other stakeholders to collaborate with the government to strengthen the health system and improve access to affordable and quality healthcare.

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