

## From the Executive Director



**Omar Badji**  
Executive Director, AAITG

Frenetic activities followed with Jammeh remaining adamant in not stepping down, radio stations being shut down, a state of emergency declared, mass resignation of ambassadors and ministers and thousands of Gambians fleeing the country, mostly to neighbouring Senegal for their safety and security amid reports of an impending attack by ECOMIG forces.

The good thing about the political deadlock is that it resulted in an unprecedented political awareness and engagement by the public than never before. The lessons learnt from the previous government will be used in the current dispensation to ensure that people’s rights are respected.

We are thankful that the impasse was peacefully resolved, thanks to ECOWAS and the ECOMIG forces and we all reported back to work. The impasse taught us that there cannot be any meaningful development without peace. ActionAid’s work must continue in the interest of the poor and marginalised. As our CSP comes to an end, consultations are already being made for the drafting of a new CSP. I am hopeful that you will continue to enjoy reading the newsletter to keep yourselves informed and up to date on our work. Equally, we are confident that you will keep sending your feedback to help us improve.

Happy reading!

## An Open Letter to President Barrow



**H.E. Adama Barrow**  
President of the Republic of The Gambia

Dear President Barrow,

Welcome. It’s your first day behind the desk and you have an enormous job on your hands. Former President Yahya Jammeh has finally left the country after a tense stand-off; many of the people who fled in fear of violence last week are returning; businesses reopening; and the whole nation is preparing to listen to what your first moves will be.

Your Excellency, I’d like you to take a moment to think about that. I’d like you to imagine a little girl standing alongside her parents in the crowd listening to you address the public. This little girl’s future is now in your hands.

For the past 22 years, her parents, like all of our citizens, have been forced into silence. They were unable to complain when they could not access basic services such as healthcare or education and saw their rights being derailed by a dictator. If they did have the courage to speak out they may well have faced arrest,

disappearance or torture. This silencing, this fear, this terrible way of operating must stop. Now.

We need to build a new civil society. And create the space for that civil society to operate. You must ensure that the Gambian people have an unequivocal, protected space to voice their concerns about your administration and how it is dealing with the massive problems of violence against women and girls, food shortages, economic migration and corruption.

But to create a truly democratic nation you need to urgently tackle our education crisis. For too long our children and young people have been denied access to a good education, denying them the opportunity to fulfil their potential or find a way out of poverty.

I hope you will promise that little girl staring up at you that you know she has the right to grow up as an educated and

**Cont’d on page 2**

politically engaged young woman, free from violence and fear. I want you to reassure her you will do all you can within your power to make a better future for her and others like her a genuine reality.

But that isn't going to be easy. Currently half of your 1.8 million citizens are illiterate and only two thirds of primary age children are enrolled in school. Most schools across the Gambia lack qualified teachers or basics like textbooks, paper and pens. Girls in the Gambia are less likely to complete their education than boys and if they do manage to break the stereotype, they can suffer stigma and even sexual violence on their journeys to and from class.

This isn't acceptable in 2017. Not if we aspire to be a modern forward facing African nation. The power to help change this, and the hopes of a young generation, now rests with you.

In your first budget as president, you must reposition greater funds for education and teacher training, and build feedback systems so that children - our country's future - can play a real role in shaping their local schools and claiming their right to learn. For the brave girls who go to school only to be raped or assaulted on the way home, you need to make sure improved government services, from the police through to health

centres through to the judiciary, know how to both support victims and punish offenders. And let's not forget that our children need to eat.

Currently 60 per cent of your country doesn't have enough to eat. Food production in the Gambia you have inherited relies on small subsistence farming, powered by women who do the majority of the work but are still not able to own the land on which they farm, which means they are less able to control whether they have enough of the right kinds of food to eat. Uncertain rains and the growing impact of climate change make their lives even harder. Right now 94 per cent of land in the Gambia has no irrigation. Measures to improve water supply will increase harvests and create a stronger supply of food.

Improving agricultural production will help to create new jobs, something which is urgently needed to help stem the flow of young men leaving our shores and taking dangerous journeys to uncertain futures in North Africa, Europe and beyond.

People from your country, mainly young men, represent the fifth largest group of asylum seekers to land on Italy's shores. They are people who have been failed by the education system, have few skills and cannot find employment in

the Gambia's towns and villages.

To keep this lost potential in our country, you must show our youth that you are listening to them, really listening. Through education, sport, apprenticeships and freedom of speech you have to convince them that home is a better alternative.

Only when these tasks are done will that the old Gambia be no more and a new Gambia - a better, happier nation - can emerge.

If that little girl watching you in the crowd grows up in this vision of a nation that she deserves, you will have passed your test and served us well.

At ActionAid we look forward to working with you and helping girls, boys, women and men across the Gambia to voice their concerns and to work with you to build a better country. We might not always agree with you. But through continued dialogue and mutual respect we will be with you every step of the way.

Yours sincerely,

Omar Badji  
Executive Director, AAITG

**Note: This letter was first published on the same day that President Adama Barrow took office.**

## ActionAid, CRS and United Purpose present checks to the Ministry of Health



During the tense political period in December 2016 when former President Jammeh refused to step down, the main hospital in Banjul was closed and patients were referred to Serrekunda General and Jammeh Foundation for Peace hospitals both located about 16km from the capital Banjul.

As there were no medical supplies, the Ministry of Health had to borrow from Senegal in order to cater for the growing needs of patients.

In January, three checks amounting to three hundred and seventeen thousand, three hundred dalasi (GMD317,310) were presented to the Ministry of Health. The presentation was made by a consortium of three INGOs ActionAid International The Gambia, Catholic Relief Services and United Purpose (formerly Concern Universal). The money was meant for Serrekunda General and Jammeh Foundation for

Peace hospitals with the aim of complementing the ministry's efforts in the repayment supplies.

In a brief speech at the presentation ceremony held at the Catholic Relief Services in Fajara, the then Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Health Saffie Lowe-Ceesay, revealed that during the political impasse, the much needed medical supplies were not available and so they had to turn to the sister republic of Senegal who came to their aid. After the dust settled, payments had to be made, and therefore they reached

## ActionAid, CRS and United Purpose present checks to the Ministry of Health

*Cont'd from page 2*

out to their development partners and were able to have some funds through the consortium. She commended the consortium through CRS, and her team for what she described, 'standing out when everybody else ran away. If this was a test, we have passed with flying colours', she said, while urging them to keep up the momentum.

CRS's Head of Country Office, Mr Ousman Njie, the Executive Director of ActionAid Omar Badji and the Programme Coordinator of United Purpose Ismaila Jarju expressed happiness and pride at the commitment of the Ministry of Health during what they called a week of stress and uncertainty. "I salute the Ministry of Health for going the extra mile and borrowing medical items from Senegal during a week of stress and uncertainty", said Omar Badji, while Ismaila Jarju called for strengthening of the consortium in order to continue to support Gambians. Ousman Njie, who chaired the ceremony expressed happiness at what he called a token contribution They all encouraged dialogue and discussion with the new government calling on them to promote democracy, transparency and accountability.

The money that was donated will be shared between Serrekunda General Hospital which will receive one hundred thousand dalasi (GMD100,000), Jammeh Foundation for Peace Hospital – seventy-five thousand dalasi (GMD75,000) and Ministry of Health – one hundred and forty-two thousand, three hundred and ten dalasi (GMD142,310).

## ActionAid Presents Mobile Clinic Vans To Worldview



Worldview The Gambia in February received two mobile clinic vans worth \$98,000 from ActionAid International The Gambia. The vans are meant to ensure the delivery of timely and quality health care services to people affected by HIV and AIDS and live in hard to reach areas in the country. The clinic vans will serve as the primary medical provider for many who lack immediate health care when it is most needed, free of charge. They will also provide teaching and awareness creation initiatives which will be further linked to the strategically positioned wellness centres in key towns and regions across the country. The wellness centres provide health interventions that promote healthy behaviour change.

In handing over the keys of the mobile clinics at a ceremony held at ActionAid's office in Kanifing, Omar Badjie, the Executive Director of ActionAid described the day as an important step in the national effort to further reach out to communities and individuals in hard-to-reach areas, in order to provide them with knowledge and skills to prevent the spread of preventable diseases such as STIs, including HIV and AIDS. "For a long time we have been wondering how to reach out to vulnerable people in remote areas with an intervention, which ensures quality, efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability. Investment in the mobile vans will go a long way in attaining our objectives and, at the same time, ensure the delivery of comprehensive health care to high risk populations and communities in the country", Badjie added. He extended profound gratitude to the Global Fund for providing the resources to support the procurement of the vans, the

government and people of The Gambia for the support and encouragement.

Alpha Khan, Deputy Director National Aids Secretarial, emphasised that mobilizing health care is a simple, obvious, and underutilized idea, adding that it is about taking screenings, primary care, advice and in some cases even hospital-grade trial out of the building and as close as possible to people's homes. "By doing this, we also get as close as possible to the early stages of health issues. It seems obvious, and yet it's rarely implemented. Mobile clinics are uniquely qualified to provide high-quality care to underserved populations with considerable cost savings".

In receiving the keys of the mobile clinics, Worldview's chairperson Amadou Tall noted the timeliness of the handing over of the vans saying that they will further enhance their work in the provision of health services. He further promised that they will utilise them for their intended purpose. Alieu Jammeh of the Health Education Directorate speaking on behalf of the then Permanent Secretary who is now the Minister of Health, Saffie Lowe Ceesay reiterated earlier sentiments that people in hard to reach areas can now have easy access to health services. She commended ActionAid for providing the vans and for complementing government's efforts in the delivery of health services.

It is expected that in implementing the mobile vans services, the national HIV and AIDS response programme will benefit from the promotion of greater access to Reproductive and Child Health services, Family Planning, HIV Counseling and Testing, condom distribution, treatment, care and support to people who need such support.

## ActionAid signs Contract with Community Radios



**Brikamaba Community Radio**

ActionAid International The Gambia in February entered into a partnership agreement with community radio stations across the country. At the ceremony held at ActionAid's conference room in Kanifing, the Executive Director Omar Badji signed on behalf of ActionAid whilst Bakary Manneh known as Big Sam signed for the community radios.

The idea behind the partnership is for the radios provide appropriate air time and broadcast HIV and AIDS messages as agreed and indicated in the schedules provided by the radios. ActionAid will liaise with them for the provision of the required information and pay them. The messages cover various aspects of HIV and AIDS prevention, parent to child transmission, stigma and discrimination, voluntary testing and counseling, among others. The key goals of the messages are to ensure zero new infections of HIV and AIDS, zero AIDS-related death, and zero stigma and discrimination. A similar agreement was entered into with all the private radio stations.

Speaking at the signing ceremony, Omar Badjie, Executive Director of ActionAid International The Gambia stated that using community radios to disseminate messages on HIV and AIDS is critical as the focus is on the prevention of new infections. He therefore appealed to community radios to be trustworthy as well as keep their promise as stated in the agreement, particularly in ensuring they stick to the time schedules they have agreed on for the messages to be aired.

Bakary Manneh, known as Big Sam, who represented community radios, thanked ActionAid International The Gambia for the partnership. He expressed delight on behalf of community radios for being the first focal points of the message dissemination and gave assurances that they would keep to the promise of ensuring the messages reach those being targetted across the country.

Bai Cham, the Global Fund Project Manager at AAITG, informed his audience that the messages were developed in seven national languages and that the messages will be used in the mass media for the prevention of HIV and AIDS infections in The Gambia.

**"I had vehemently refused to accept that women should own land but my perception has now changed."**

**Alhaji Babacarr Mbye**

Alhaji Babacarr Mbye is the 70 year old Alkali (village head) of Sambang Wolof in the Niamina Dankunku district in the Central River Region of The Gambia. Sambang, with less than 1000 inhabitants is a village about 24 1 9 km East of the capital city of Banjul. In November 2016, a sensitization programme on women's rights and related matters was held in nearby Dankunku village targeting Chiefs and Alkalolu from the three Niamina Districts; Niamina Dankunku, Niamina West and Niamina East. The theme of the sensitisation centered on women's rights and in general a broad range of issues such as ownership of productive resources, decision making, inheritance, marriage rights, domestic violence, and sexual offences amongst many others. Alhaji Babacarr had vehemently refused to accept that women should

own and control land, before the two sensitization day programme.

"I am the alkali of the village and people consult me about matters and enquiries relating to the village. When the villagers also want something in the village, they come to me. For example, when the villagers wanted to build an Arabic school, they came to me and I gave them a piece of land from my farm. If anyone wants land they come to me and inform me. I will then ask/consult with the land owners if they can provide the land. If the owner agrees, then a piece of his land is given to the person. When a Land owner refuses, then we look elsewhere where we discuss and mutually agree for land to be allocated for a purpose. When land is given /allocated to a person

**Cont'd on page 5**



**Alkali Baboucarr Mbye**

“...my perception has now changed.”

Cont'd from page 4

and he or she now wants to leave, any person interested can be allowed to replace/take over.

In the past, the alkali was the decision maker. The village was divided into sections. This compound you are sitting in is owned by Mbayens, [pointing] this other side is owned by the Ngetens, that side by the Jallow and that side by the Ceesay. If you come here and your surname is Ceesay, we ask you to go to the side owned by the Ceesays. If your surname is Nget, you go to the Ngetens for a piece of land, if you are a Mbye you go to the Mbyens and so on. In the past women farmed on the lowland for rice production and the men farmed on the upland where they grew groundnuts, millet, maize and so on. Every woman had a rice farm and they were helped by their husbands. They grew a lot of rice, but now rice is no longer available as the rice farms are no longer cultivated because access to rice fields is very difficult as the culverts and the bridges were all spoilt. Imported rice is what is available and is very expensive. A bag of rice used to cost 25 dalasi. One cup of rice was 3 pence. The men did not get anything out of this work, it was voluntary.

During the sensitization programme conducted by the EU and ActionAid, I had vehemently refused to accept that women should own land. This is because of an age old tradition where women used to grow rice on the lowland. At that time, women had no voice on ownership of farmland. They had voice over lowland rice production.

When rice growing became a problem, one would give his wife or a member of his family a piece of his farmland where they could grow, maize, millet/, groundnut or whatever they want. If you want they can also do gardening and grow tomatoes, bitter tomatoes, garden eggs which they would sell to take care of their families. This is what used to happen and is the reason for my refusal. But now things have changed, and whatever you are engaged in, you should share with your partners so that they too will have a means of livelihood for themselves and their families. Now I agree that women should own upland farms. My initial refusal is not because I am a bad person. I changed my mind after the sensitization where I learnt a lot. I believe women should own land and make investments on that land and grow whatever they want on that land. In fact someone came here from Jarring and made requests for land for women farmers. I gave them a big area. I don't know how big it is because they did not tell me when they measured it. They can dig a well there and do gardening and grow whatever they want. I have given them that land. It will be useful for the women because if they grow bananas, tomatoes, cassava, eggplant or whatever and sell them, they will be able to take care of themselves and their families. It can only contribute to the food security situation in the village. I know that my forefathers would have agreed with the way I am handling the issues of women and land if they were still alive.”

## Testimony of an Ex-circumciser

The Network against Gender Based Violence in partnership with ActionAid International The Gambia with support from AmplifyChange is currently implementing a two-year project to advocate for the eradication of FGM in The Gambia. We are pleased to share the testimony of an ex-circumciser in the Central River Region who benefited from one of the project's community sensitization programmes to create awareness on some of the hidden consequences of FGM. Here is a testimony of a former circumciser:

“I am an ex-circumciser. I inherited the work from my mother whose mother, my grandma was also a circumciser. I have stopped doing it because of the negative impact. The impact has many dimensions. The process of conducting FGM is tedious, time consuming, expensive and full of stress. In my village we plan FGM for one year. During that period all the parents will mobilize resources by working on the farm through families and friends. As the circumciser I have to prepare myself spiritually which requires spending money or use of small ruminants (goats and sheep) to pay marabouts for the spiritual preparation. I have to do this for the protection of the kids from witch craft. Also I will be in constant fear before and after the FGM exercise had taken place thinking and doing everything for all the children to undergo FGM successfully healed and go back to their parents. Equally, the parents also have to prepare their kids spiritually by visiting marabouts, taking out charity as well as putting their hopes on the circumciser as having super natural powers and can process people.

On the day itself a lot of money is spent for the ceremony. Lots of food are prepared and families who can afford it will slaughter a goat or sheep. Those who cannot afford it will slaughter chickens. I have never tasted the food cooked during that day because I am always under serious psychological trauma. Many of the children also would not eat the food that day because of pain, while some are restless due to severe bleeding and others are in the state of shock.

After the short term as some girls grow up they will experience severe dysmenorrhea because the menstrual blood can't flow correctly. When they are ready for marriage some of them have to come back for the seal to be opened with a knife and immediately they will be taken back to their husbands to have sex with them that night.

Cont'd on page 5

## Testimony of an Ex-circumciser

*Cont'd from page 4*

Some of them go into shock because of the pain. That is where some women will fear having sex again and will always give excuses not to have sex with their husbands which sometimes results to domestic violence, such as denial of basic needs or battering. When such woman become pregnant some end up having prolonged labour because the vagina is tight which often results to big tear and they can't hold their urine which sometimes come with faeces (bilateral episiotomy or caesarean section) if they are lucky and are in the health facility but others end up having fistula".

These and many other reasons made me to stop performing FGM. I WILL NEVER CIRCUMSIZE A GIRL OR A WOMAN AGAIN. Am happy the law on FGM is in place and I will go all out to prevent it if I hear anyone planning to do it.



Girls initiated in Basse, URR