

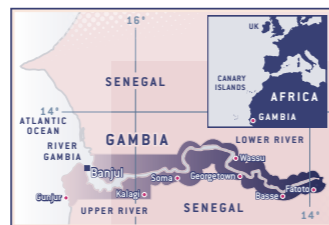
Growing for a future in The Gambia

Last summer's devastating floods convinced many that climate change is more than just a popular myth. But in some developing countries a changing climate is adding to an already severe food crisis, as **Ian Ashbridge** finds out

* A series of groundbreaking investigative reports from around the world giving you a unique insight into international trends and issues impacting on UK farming in the future



IAN ASHBRIDGE BUSINESS EDITOR REPORTING FROM THE GAMBIA



Imagine the land you farm shrinking each year, as an unpredictable and implacable force robs more and more good soil from farmers and food from people's mouths.

This is the reality for farmers in The Gambia, a desperately poor country in West Africa, half the size of Wales, with more than 1.5m mouths to feed. Land that once produced rice is condemned in just two years to nothing more than salty, sterile sand.

In February, I visited the country with British charity Concern Universal to see how climate change is affecting an agriculture so fragile that The Gambia has only 37% food security. More than half of its population lives on less than 50p/day. The market for groundnuts (peanuts), the staple crop, collapsed on the back of oversupplied world markets, mainly caused by US production. Many Gambian farmers have received no money for the 2006 harvest.

Once one of the most isolated of Britain's colonial outposts, The Gambia achieved independence in 1963. Surrounded on three sides by French-speaking Senegal, The Gambia has few surfaced roads, no railways and unreliable power generation.

Abdoulie Tourray, a senior lecturer at Njawara Agricultural Training Centre near the Senegalese border, is under no illusions as to the threat his continent faces. "The effect of climate change is becoming more and more pronounced in Africa, with its negative short-term effects and impacts being seen and felt."

Agriculture is the main driving

force for The Gambia's economy and employs more than 75% of the population. Domestic agriculture is the main source of food for most Gambians and accounts for a quarter of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).

"Average rainfall has declined by 35% in the past 30 years. The most significant effect of climate variability in the Gambia is the decline in rainfall," says Mr Tourray.

Seasonal rains are becoming more erratic at the start and end of the crucial rainy season. Droughts have become more frequent and severe, leading to loss of vegetation, and sandy soils with less than 0.2% organic matter are ravaged by nutrient loss through leaching. But much more severe is the flooding of the River Gambia, around which the country exists. Essentially, The Gambia is one massive, shallow river valley, only 53m above sea level at its highest point. The locals, without a trace of irony, refer to these as the "uplands".

The River Gambia is tidal – and therefore saline – more than 250km inland from its estuary, yet rising sea levels cause leaching of fertile soils further and further inland each year. All that is left is a barren, sandy desert, with the salt deposits glistening on its surface.

"The degraded soil fertility has



increased the use of chemical fertilisers for crop production. This has not only affected aquatic life due to excess chemical washed into the sea, but also increased the costs of production," says Mr Tourray.

But it is in its human consequences that the cumulative effects of climate variability are being felt.

Sandan Bojang is director of The Gambia's Trust Agency for Rural Development. He has seen the effects of a changing climate lead to land degradation, increased water scarcity and loss of biodiversity in his lifetime.

"The negative impacts of climatic change are considerable in developing countries like The Gambia, from food insecurity caused by changes in rainfall to the threat to life from natural dis-



asters due to extreme weather, like floods and windstorms."

Severe coastal erosion also threatens the Gambia's beaches, the prop that supports its tourism industry and lifeline to the western economy. A warming climate also brings the threat of increased susceptibility to insect-borne diseases – a deadly threat in a region where malaria, yellow fever and sleeping sickness are commonplace.

But climate change is not the only threat facing these people. Gambian farmers follow the conventions of subsistence agriculture – poor yields, poor quality and seasonal flooding of the market.

It could not be further away from westernised commercial farming, yet British farmers will recognise several features of the Gambian growers' lot.

CHEAP IMPORTS

Farmers' crops are dependant on rain-fed agriculture – irrigation is



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Job: Helping Gambian farmers beat cheap imports by supplying the major tourist hotels directly.

Day to day: Providing a first-class fresh produce delivery service from farms direct to GiG customers in top hotels and through local markets, combining the best quality with the best possible returns to benefit Gambian farmers and growers.

The challenge: To provide the most effective marketing outlet for small-scale farmers and growers in The Gambia and, in time, to displace all imported produce with locally grown food. Management of seed, inputs, staff and liaising with donors.

Who? The job needs a creative, adaptable, entrepreneurial problem-solver with excellent financial and negotiating skills – and a lot of patience. Jobs like this don't come along everyday – this is a real chance for one individual to really make a difference to people's lives. Call Catriona Lennox on 01432 355 111 or Niall O'Connor, CU's Gambia Director, on 00 220 4494 473 to find out more.



Climate impacts: Floods in the UK last year (left) are just one outcome. For the potentially productive Gambia (top left) variable rainfall can have devastating consequences (above).

rare, unimaginably expensive for large-scale cropping and restricted to hauling buckets of water from wells to feed small-scale horticultural enterprises. So most crops face a glut period.

But just as tonnes of excess crops are rotting, the market is flooded with cheaper imports from Holland, France, the Canary Islands and nearby Senegal – all destined for The Gambia's thriving tourist hotels.

But to access these premium markets, growers must first pro-



* **WATCH** You can get a feel for travelling through The Gambia with our online videos, shot by FW journalist Ian Ashbridge during February 2008 – also read more about his Gambia experience at www.fwi.co.uk/gambia

* **LISTEN** You can hear Ian talking about farming in The Gambia in a BBC local radio interview. Visit www.fwi.co.uk/gambia

duce enough to feed themselves, and then meet demands of modern consumers – quality, uniformity, reliability of supply and a longer season.

CONCERN UNIVERSAL'S RESPONSE

In a joint venture with UK organic fruit grower Haygrove, Concern Universal created Gambia is Good, a "pro-poor" fresh produce marketing company which replaces middlemen between growers and hotel and restaurant buyers. By meeting these customers needs directly and in person, GiG has been able to understand their needs, negotiate fair prices and prepare detailed production plans and agronomic support for farmers.

In 2006, GiG diverted more than £34,000 of sales away from importers and into the hands of local, small-scale farmers and growers.

Hoteliers welcomed the move and now buy more than 20t of fresh produce a month during the tourist season.

However, there is disturbing evidence of hoteliers acting as a cartel to force down the price paid to Gambian growers. This culminated in a stand-off last year, with crisis only narrowly averted by the personal efforts of GiG staff.

GiG has now joined forces with The Travel Foundation to set up its own open farm to illustrate best practice. Together with other initiatives it is making a real difference.

Take Ousman Watara for example. After nine months training in horticulture, he began growing for GiG and with the help of production training, input procurement and marketing support, has increased his income more than ten-fold to more than D7500 (£150 a month). Many more Gambians would like to follow in his footsteps.

PROBLEMS FACING GAMBIAN (AND BRITISH) AGRICULTURE...

* Rural-urban drift – Young people leaving rural areas, rural communities and livelihoods to try to find employment or wealth in the cities, starving agriculture of efficient labour. In the Gambia, this problem also leads to bigger populations in urban areas which need to be fed.

* Farmers have concentrated on increasing production and yields – particularly in the groundnut crop – but have become increasingly isolated from markets.

* Same language, different meanings. "Traditionally grown", or "produced using traditional methods" means backward, inadequate and often dangerous in terms of food security – a far cry from the wholesome, organic and premium-brand use of those terms to promote food in the UK.

* Typical rotation – Groundnuts followed by a cereal (usually maize, millet or sorghum) followed by a period as fallow land, up to two years. Scrub or bush grows quickly over fallow land leading to "slash-and-burn" method of clearing it for cultivation.

SEE FOR YOURSELF: WEST AFRICA FARM EXPERIENCE 2009

* In February 2009, Concern Universal will be organising another visit to see the work of Gambia is Good and other CU projects to help farmers and food production in The Gambia. Places are open to anyone, but those with an interest in or experience of agriculture are likely to get the most out of the trip.

Alternatively, if you're interested in international development or just want a unique experience of this tiny African country, visit www.concern-universal.org or contact catriona.lennox@concern-universal.org

