The stories featured in this publication are true and have been relayed by Gambians who have received return and reintegration assistance by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The opinions expressed in the book are those of the protagonists and do not necessarily reflect the views of IOM. The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout the book do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IOM concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning its frontiers or boundaries.

IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental organization, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration; to advance understanding of migration issues, to encourage social and economic development through migration, and to uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants.
EU-IOM
Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration

The EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration is a regional initiative covering and closely cooperating with 26 countries in North Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel and Lake Chad region. It aims to facilitate the sustainable reintegration of returning migrants and to contribute to strengthening migration governance.

The Joint Initiative’s inclusive approach involves key stakeholders, such as migrants’ associations, community-based organizations and local communities to ensure that, in the future, Gambians will choose to migrate using regular means as a matter of choice, rather than necessity.

IOM works closely with the Government of The Gambia, particularly the Ministry of Interior, which has the mandate to lead on migration governance in the country.

Key components of the Joint Initiative:

Strategic Objective 1 - Reintegration
- Provision of reintegration assistance to returning Gambians
- Capacity building of national and local stakeholders to ensure sustainable reintegration activities

Strategic Objective 2 - Awareness Raising
- Information and sensitization activities targeting the general public on the risks of and alternatives to irregular migration

Strategic Objective 3 - Data Collection
- Collection and analysis of data on migration flows
RETURN
AND REINTEGRATION

In recent years, social, political and economic conditions led many young Gambians to leave the country on irregular migration routes in search of better lives.

Along the irregular migratory routes, migrants may face significant protection issues, including violence, exploitation and abuse at the hands of smugglers and traffickers.

Voluntary return can be an important protection measure. It is one of the options for stranded migrants facing dire conditions along the routes and who wish to return to their countries of origin, but do not have the necessary means to do so. Voluntary return is conducted with no prejudice to the principle of non-refoulement.

TAILORED APPROACH

The support follows a tailored approach, putting the rights and the needs of the migrant first. For migrants in vulnerable situations, such as victims of trafficking, unaccompanied or separated migrant children and migrants with health needs, IOM follows specific procedures with proper safeguards in place. For unaccompanied minors, IOM engages in family tracing and family reunification.

A further vulnerability assessment is carried out after return and reintegration assistance is tailored to specific needs and opportunities. Many migrants return tired and traumatized and may not always be ready to start professional or skills development training straight away.

IOM’s initial target was to assist in the return and reintegration of 1,500 Gambians over three years. From January 2017 to December 2021, IOM has assisted over 6,000 Gambians.
SUSTAINABLE REINTEGRATION

Once in their country of origin, returning migrants may encounter a number of challenges which can impact their ability to readjust to life and reestablish themselves, equally impacting other members of their community. The Joint Initiative aims at enabling returnees to reintegrate through a holistic approach that supports both migrants’ and their communities’ economic, social and psychosocial needs.

The involvement of communities highlights that reintegration is a two-way process between the returnee and the community, as reintegration has the potential to complement local development and mitigates drivers of irregular migration.

This is not a simple or short-term process, as the factors impacting the sustainability of reintegration are similar to those that led to the decision to migrate in the first place. Furthermore, additional factors resulting from the migration experience itself (e.g. debt, separation, trauma) must be taken into account.

An effective and comprehensive referral and partnership system is one of the key components of reintegration assistance. Whenever possible, referral to local partners and services constitutes a viable first option for returning migrants.

Editorial Note: In this publication, “backway” is used as the colloquial commonly used by Gambians to refer to irregular migration.

Reintegration Assistance may consist of:

- Referrals to programmes or services available in the country
- Medical care, psychosocial support or assistance for basic needs for the most vulnerable
- Support to pursue education or to enroll in vocational training
- Support for job insertion
- Support to set up or strengthen a small business as an individual, with other returnees (collective project) or with members of your community (community-based reintegration)

Partnerships and Coordination:
Outward Referral Mechanism

IOM works with several partners in The Gambia to ensure that returnees are provided with all possible assistance available to them to support a sustainable reintegration process. IOM has formalized agreements with the Belgian Development Agency (Enabel), German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ), Instituto Marquês de Valle Flôr (IMVF), International Trade Centre (ITC) and others to refer returnees assisted by IOM to other opportunities.
I currently have two people I am working with and three others that I am training in my shop.

I left The Gambia in 2016 because, like many other young people, I believed that Europe was the only place I could make it. It took me four months before I reached Libya. I had to do odd jobs for my survival and to fund the crossing to Europe. I was imprisoned a couple of times but managed to escape when the prison was attacked.

When I came home in 2017, I was sick. It took me two months to recover from the illness and the traumatizing experiences I underwent on my journey. Thankfully, my family welcomed and encouraged me to move on with my life, reminding me that these are trials and tribulations one encounters. My dad was very supportive through my hard times; he motivated me to start doing my tailoring work again. His words of encouragement made me strong and committed to achieve and accomplish my goals.

When I settled in, I received support from IOM in the form of a sewing machine, fabrics, and other necessary materials for a tailoring shop, because I wanted to pursue the skill that I have, which is tailoring. I have always had a passion for tailoring. It is the only thing I was engaged in before I left for the backway.

I currently work with two people, and I train three others at my shop. I can’t be more grateful for all that my life has turned out to be. All hopes weren’t lost.

After setting up my business, I was then recommended for an entrepreneurship training with Empretec, through the International Trade Center. This training has given me the knowledge on how to properly operate and how to keep records of my business. To me, business was all about making profit, forgetting about accounting and saving for future expansions.

We all know how difficult life is at this point of the pandemic. Tailoring work is more in demand during feasts, and, at this point, we have few people who bring fabrics for sewing. Despite this, I would love to build my skills more through further training and to expand my business.

All in all, what I can say is that the backway journey ends with regret. You would ask yourself why you took the journey. Life is not worth the sacrifice you make. If you can work or start a small business in your country, go for it. When it comes to travelling, do it the right way; it is safer. On the backway, the risks are way more than the potential benefits.
“I am now able to provide for my family with their needs and save some for my future investments.”

I used to go to an Arabic school and, every now and then, I would search for jobs at construction sites to earn some money before embarking on the backway in June 2015, I was only 17 years old. It wasn’t easy for me here because I was struggling to make ends meet as the first child in my family. I was young and naïve.

I got stranded and was detained in Libya for two years. I made two attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea but there was no possible way to cross. My captives tried to kill me on several occasions. My family lost all its resources because of me. Whenever I got caught, they would send money to my captives for my release. This really affected them financially and mentally. They even thought that I was dead at some point.

When I returned in 2018, my family welcomed me warmly, and encouraged me to continue with my life – they said that I was young and would achieve anything if I put some determination to it.

I attended a training in entrepreneurship and construction at Insight Training Center for three months, then I received tools and one hundred bags of cement as part of my reintegration assistance from IOM. I used the cement to renovate our family house because it was in a bad state.

I wanted to further my constructions skills, and Enabel gave me the opportunity to through a cash-for-work programme. Now, anytime Enabel has a job opportunity, they contact us, and pay us every two weeks. We are currently building the youth centre in Farafenni.

Before I left for the backway, my family and I were living in a family compound, but now things are different. I was able to purchase my own land and am in the process of building a house. I can now provide for my family and save some money for my future investments. In the future, I hope to have my own construction company, and will be able to contribute to national development. When I came back, I realized that I wasted a lot of time and resources that could have taken me a long way. Thank God that I am back now, building on my mistakes, and trying to fulfil my dreams here.
I embarked on the backway with the idea that it would change my life for the better, like most youths do who have the mentality of travelling to Europe. I decided to leave in September 2017. It took me almost seven months before I reached Morocco. I spent one year there and proceeded to Algeria where I worked as a labourer for one month. I made numerous attempts to move to Tripoli but to no avail.

I decided to return to The Gambia in 2019 and engaged in farming. It wasn’t going as expected. There was no equipment to make the work any easier, and I did not have money for crops. I was called a failure by some people in the community, but my family stood by me, and supported me with all that I wanted to achieve.

After engaging members of my community, we concluded that the communities around this area have no milling machines, and that having one would add to our development in Yonna in the Central River Region. Together with our Village Development Committee (VDC), we had the opportunity to participate in a training on business and entrepreneurship, organized by IMVF.

After the training, we secured three multi-purpose milling machines from IOM, which have reduced the struggles we used to face – travelling more than 30 kilometres on foot or on donkeys to other communities to pound our millets and cous.

In everything you see in life, though, there are challenges. The machines are well placed but sometimes we face challenges repairing them because the technician is not always available. Having to transport to buy fuel for the machines every week is also a big challenge. I had plans to venture into commercial transportation because some places are very remote.

But for now, I want to continue with the community project. The income we generate from the milling machines is very helpful for me, my family and the community at large. The machines have improved food security in our community and reduced the stress on women and children. Our women no longer have to spend much time and energy on pounding the millets and cous. Life is easier now.
“My advice for the youth is to keep striving and not give up in trying to achieve your dreams.”

I left The Gambia in October 2015 and took the backway. I had a mission that I wanted to accomplish, which was to help my dad as he was the only breadwinner in the family. Before I left, I had my own tailoring shop, which I operated with my brother.

I decided to leave when my shop was not going as expected, even though my dad convinced me to manage it. I just wanted to go. With a direct bus to Senegal, Mali, then Algeria, I found myself stuck there.

I stayed there and worked at an estate, doing different jobs to sustain myself. I moved to Morocco in 2015 after several failed attempts to cross the sea to Spain. I always got caught trying to take the boat. It was a difficult time for me; I sometimes had to beg to survive.

I decided to come back in 2020 to start my life all over again. My family welcomed me with open arms. I came with a positive mind and was ready for the challenges I would face. When I returned, I started molding bricks. I didn’t want to depend on my family. I took up every possible job I could get before I received my reintegration assistance from IOM in the form of machines and materials for my shop.

I also benefited from the Standing for Youth initiative, which made a huge impact on my life. After being coached on business and entrepreneurship, I now have the required knowledge to manage my finances and customer relations. With a cash grant, I opened my shop, bought materials and opened a business account.

My motivation to continue the tailoring business grew more when I started making personal protective equipment (PPE) and received compliments from customers. When I wanted to go back to school, IOM referred me to one of GIZ’s programmes. GIZ supported me to take a nine-month course on fashion and design.

I am building my own brand now. Nonetheless, every business has its challenges. I wish to have more machines, and electricity cuts are always a setback. Other young people end up leaving their businesses, but I tackle these challenges daily.

My advice for the youth is to keep striving and not give up in trying to achieve your dreams. I have fallen many times and stood back up again. One should have a mission, know what you want and follow it. Apply for opportunities and take the chances. You never know where you will find yourself in the future. Let’s liberate our minds from the concept of “we cannot make it here” – yes, we can!

Abdou was also a beneficiary of IOM’s Standing 4 Youth entrepreneurship programme, funded by the UK Government through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.
I feel so happy, because life is smiling at me now.

My reason for embarking on the backway journey was a result of difficult circumstances. I was working as a tailor when my mother fell ill and was diagnosed with cancer. After multiple attempts to treat her, she passed away. My father also passed away three to four months after, and that's when family's situation started to become difficult. I left The Gambia on the fourth night after my father's death.

Once in Libya, I started doing jobs such as masonry and cleaning while waiting for a boat to set sail for Europe. In Tripoli, I worked in road construction for two months. When I earned enough money to pay for my boat trip, I sailed to sea. While we were at sea and very close to reaching Italy, we were arrested. We were taken back to Libya and detained for three months.

When I returned home, the negative comments from people about my failed attempt to reach Europe started to bother me. Luckily, my family was really welcoming towards me. They were so excited that the entire compound started to cry because they thought I was dead. It was full of people, and I felt so sad to have gone in the first place.

I decided to ignore the negative comments and to keep focused on my work. I went to the carpenter and purchased a table for the two sewing machines I received from IOM. I feel so happy because life is smiling at me now.

Later on, IOM called to ask if I was interested in further building my skills as a tailor. I was referred to the International Trade Centre to enroll in a training course at Empretec on entrepreneurship and business management. I received a certificate at the end of the training. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was also given a contract by IOM to sew personal protective equipment (PPE), and I used part of the money to buy a vehicle. This has allowed me to work as a taxi driver when the demand for sewing is low.

I am happy to be independent today, and I am planning to invest more in my tailoring business. This is my area of expertise, and I have the know-how. Today, I have two other people working under my supervision. So, I have not only been an investor, but also an employer.
In 2016, I embarked on the backway journey because of peer influence. Some of my friends made it to Europe. I do not know how and what they did, but I know that it was not easy for most of them. Some even died on the way, others got sick.

I left without informing some of my family members. It took me almost three months before I entered Libya. There, life was very difficult. There was no security, and everybody lived in fear. I sometimes managed to go out and do some jobs to earn money.

I was caught and imprisoned for almost three months. I paid some money to be released, only to be rearrested for another three months. I realized that I was just wasting my time and decided to get in touch with other Gambians who were planning to return home. In 2018, I came back empty-handed.

Upon my return, some members of my family were disappointed, but they took it in good faith. There wasn’t much I feared when I returned. I was a carpenter before I embarked on the journey, so, with IOM’s assistance, I enrolled in a series of trainings at the National Youth Service Scheme (NYSS) for three months where I enhanced my carpentry skills.

IOM then referred me to another entrepreneurship training by Enabel. I was given tools and raw materials to start things on my own. These trainings really improved my life, and now I am training in roofing, make modern furniture, attach pillars, and set up foundations for construction.

At the moment, I am faced with some challenges because I need more tools for the work as carpentry is advancing. With everything in life, though, there are challenges. So, it is on me to move higher and do something different with the support I received, which was already a big start because I came back empty-handed. I want to establish my own workshop in the Greater Banjul Area because the demand there is higher.

Youths in this country should know that there are opportunities available to them, which they should try and explore. For me, I totally regret going through the backway. There was a time during the journey when I regretted everything, and just wanted to come home. It was not the right way to make life better.

“Youth in this country should know that there are opportunities available for them, which they should try and explore.”
Like many other young people, I left The Gambia in 2014 with the hope of reaching Europe through the backway. Life was difficult for me as my parents’ oldest child who were totally dependent on me. Even though I made a living as a mason, it wasn’t enough to provide for my parents and other family members.

Once in Tripoli, I tried to pay for the boat to Europe, but we were caught in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. This was my worst experience. I was captured and sent to a prison. I stayed in that prison for one year, suffering torture and bad treatment. All that I had worked for was taken, and I had to learn to work and pay again. We had little food to survive on. Each of us paid CFA 100,000 (approximately USD 200) to leave that prison, and even that was not a guarantee that you would be freed. When I left the prison, I worked again for another year in Libya, but conditions were still hard.

Upon my return in 2018, my family welcomed me warmly. In November 2019, I started the process of receiving my reintegration assistance IOM. During the counseling sessions, I decided I wanted to open a shop in my community, Tankularr in the Lower River Region.

With the assistance I received, I was able to open my grocery shop. Later, I was referred to IMVF and attended two business management trainings in Farafenni and Basse. Initially, my goal was to continue working in the construction industry, but I realized that my village is very remote, and needed a grocery store nearby. So, I continued with this business.

I do not regret investing in a consumer shop. I am now able to make ends meet for my family and to make decisions on my own. Before leaving, I didn’t see any opportunities in this country. It was all about leaving for Italy to make money. I heard many stories in our community about young people who died during the journey, but this never stopped me from wanting to go. Today, I know very well that was not a good plan. Now I am contributing by providing my community with their basic needs, while I can make my own profit. I couldn’t have done this if I had died during the journey to Italy.

My advice to young people like me is to try all your best here. It can be hard, but we can all make it if we try hard.
EBRIMA
“I believe that, with commitment and determination, we can achieve anything we want to.”

I used to be a taxi driver before I left for the backway in 2015. The main reason that pushed me to attempt the journey was the desire to improve the living conditions of my family.

I left with GMD 23,000 (approximately USD 440) but I spent it all before I could reach Agadez. It took me a month to arrive in Libya. Once there, I looked for odd jobs at building sites or any other available job opportunity to make ends meet. There is neither family nor friend who would assist you out there. You have to learn how to survive on your own.

I was imprisoned twice. My mother had to sell two of the plots of land we had in order to pay for me to be released from prison. This caused me great sorrow so in September 2017, I decided to come back home. The journey proved to be hard and unbearable, and I could not bear the pain anymore. Living in Libya was not easy at all. You either get arrested or you struggle for survival, so coming back home was the only solution for me.

Upon my return, I received a lot of criticism from my family; some of them even said they knew I wouldn’t make it. You get criticized even among your peers. When you tell young people not to embark on the journey, they see you as a failure. They think that you don’t want them to attempt the backway because you failed at it. When they leave, they realize that it is not an easy journey.

We don’t want the youth to embark on this dreadful journey like we did. We also were advised about the risks by our brothers who had taken the journey before us, but we did not believe a word until it was our turn and we learned it ourselves. When you go to a country, you want freedom, but instead it is the opposite on the backway: You will hide every single day of your life, so it is not worth the risk.

With help from the reintegration assistance I received from IOM, I decided to run a grocery shop, because I believed it was something I can push and build myself around. I have been running the store for three years now. I was trained on entrepreneurship through the International Trade Centre’s Youth Empowerment Project (YEP), which really helped me account for my business operations and learn how to handle my profit. GIZ also supported me with some materials for a poultry farm, which I am still trying to work on.

Now, my business is going fine, and I would like to expand it in future. I hope to have a bigger shop that sells almost everything. I believe that, with commitment and determination, we can achieve anything we want to.
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