

## **REPORT ON THE YOUTH BANTABA HELD IN NJOLFFEN VILLAGE KIANG EAST, LOWER RIVER REGION**

### **1:1: Introduction:**

This project was implemented in partnership with Future in Our Hands (FIOH) It is part of an overall advocacy strategy of bringing to the fore pertinent issues which have a significant bearing on the democratic evolution and positive socio-economic development of the youth and the country at large.

The Youth Bantaba, is among a series of project activities aimed at promoting responsible youth participation in the socio-economic development of the Gambia. It provides an enabling forum where relevant issues affecting the youth are raised for critical and frank dialogue.

### **2:1: Methodology:**

This activity has been designed to be participatory and interactive in its conduct. A checklist containing all the relevant thematic areas for discussion is developed to guide the process. The main thematic areas for discussion include:

- Illegal migration
- Early marriage
- Teenage pregnancy
- Gender
- HIV/AIDS
- FGM
- Girls' education
- Youth unemployment

- Environmental issues

The Youth Bantaba took the form of an open questions and answer session by the participants, led by a moderator.

### **3:1: Opening session: The village head's welcoming remarks:**

In his opening welcoming remarks, the village head expressed appreciation for Future in Our Hands conducting such an important activity in his community. He said the timing could not have been better in the wake of the recent political developments in the Gambia. He urged both male and female participants to make maximum use of the opportunity created by this youth Bantaba. He thanked FIOH for the initiative and assures them of his unequivocal support.

### **3: 2: Statement By ADA's Administration and Finance Officer**

He outlined the rationale behind the implementation of this activity, and highlighted the target objectives as:

- Ensuring greater youth participation in the socio-economic development of the Gambia
- Enhance cooperation amongst the youth folk
- Raise levels of awareness regarding key issues of the day affecting the healthy development of the youths, like illegal migration

The Programme officer made reference to the close working collaboration between Future in Our Hands (FIOH) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), especially in the area of promoting citizens participation in the democratic process.

### **3:3: Open Discussion Session:**

Using the discussion checklist as a guide, the moderator provoked a discussion around the trend of illegal migration by both male and female youths to Europe using the perilous so-called “back way”. He made the following points:

- That the youth folk are the cream of the society
- A lot of the youth folk are embarking on using illegal means to migrate to other countries for greener pasture
- Almost every town and village in the Gambia has been affected by this illegal migration
- Whereas some have succeeded in getting into Europe, others have died whilst pursuing the same dreams
- There are some socio-economic problems associated with the trend of illegal migration
- Most of the youth embark on the trip without necessarily understanding all what is at stake and what could potentially go wrong even if they succeed in getting into to Europe.
- European countries are doing everything possible to stop the wave of illegal migration

In his contribution to the discussions, Mr. Buba Ceesay a youth from Njollfen village intimated that even though some people succeed, the negative consequences of the illegal migration far outweigh its potential benefits. Mr. Ceesay indicated that lives are lost at sea, enormous brain drain, dwindling of the youth population, and significant loss of valuable labor force especially in the agricultural sector, all combine to make this form of migration very undesirable. He indicated that the amounts of money invested in these ventures could

be better used to start businesses and other useful enterprises in the country.

Mr. Abdoulie Ceesay, in his intervention, stressed the very reason why youths embark on these perilous journeys in the first place. He associated the illegal migration to the chronic poverty and lack of employment opportunities in the country. According to Mr. Ceesay, it is success stories of those who made it to Europe that inspires other youths to risk everything to go there too. He said the way forward is to form strong youth groups to act as pressure groups which will in turn lobby the national government to create employment opportunities for the youth.

Madame Fatoumatajadou also a youth, intimated that the phenomenon described as the “back way”, should be addressed by the government by discussing with friendly countries to ease visa restrictions and create job opportunities.

According to Penda Ceesay of Njollfen village, “ no parent wishes his or her sibling to die in faraway waters in search of greener pastures”, what drives youth into these agonizing trips is the sheer will to extricate themselves out of poverty. She indicated that concrete steps should be taken by government to ease the poverty burden and create employment opportunities for the youth.

#### **4:1: Early Marriage:**

The open discussions then shifted to the early marriage, and the moderator challenged the women participants to give their take on the issue.

In response, Fatou Jallow a female youth indicated that there is an appropriate age for marriage and this is supposed to be 18 years, and if a girl attains that age she should be married.

According to Fatou Cusseh from Njollfen village, her daughter was 20 years and was going to school when they ask her to drop out and get married, but she refused. The daughter has now graduated from school and is working benefitting herself and supporting the family.

In her contribution to the deliberations, Yobajawo indicated that the teachers themselves are to be blamed for some situations. She highlighted instances when some girl children are impregnated by teachers, and this forces their parents to drop them out of school for marriage.

According to Yoba, the importance of education cannot be over emphasized, especially for the girl child, and she cited the following advantages:

- Education helps in instilling discipline in children both boys and girls.
- It also helps in averting teenage pregnancy as well as early marriage

She also made the point that the health of a woman in the reproductive age depends to a large extent on her maturity and therefore marrying at the right age is critical to maintaining good health during their reproductive life.

Deya Ceesay attributed early marriage to some of these reasons:

- ❖ The culture of arranged marriages

- ❖ Marrying across the border in neighboring Senegal
- ❖ Most parents are not educated and cannot appreciate the importance of education
- ❖ Poverty

In the opinion of Buba Ceesay, it is very significant for women/the girl child to be educated, because it empowers them to take care of the family more effectively, especially with regards to family life education (FLE). According to Buba, access to education should be equal for both boys and girls.

Yaya Ndow is a newly graduated grade 12 student from Njollfen, and in his contribution, highlighted the role of education in maintaining social status, as well as enabling household heads take greater care of their families. Yaya urged parents to send their siblings to school for a prospective future.

According to Yaya, he would prefer an educated girl as a wife to an uneducated girl because he shares more in common with an educated girl, and they can also better take care of their family.

#### **4:2: The head teacher's intervention:**

The head teacher, Mr. Jatta expressed his delight at this Youth Bantaba, and he thanked FIOH for organizing it. He said it has the potential to significantly help parents in the upbringing of their children. He also emphasized the value for both western and Islamic education for both boys and girls.

He highlighted the negative perceptions regarding teachers as alluded to by some of the participants, however, this should not be a reason for parents not sending their children to school, or taking them out of

school for marriage. The head teacher reassured the Bantaba that there are very strict laws regarding teacher's misbehavior and any of them caught wanting would be seriously dealt with by the law. He also made the following points:

- The cross border marrying of the school girls should be seriously securitized and actions taken to avert it.
- Advocacy efforts should be intensified regarding early marriage and girl's education
- Intensification of family life education at both school and household levels

### **5:1: Gender issues:**

The Bantaba then focused into gender issues and the Programme officer FIOH made the following points:

- ❖ Gender is about men and women supporting each other in the healthy management of households.
- ❖ Efforts should be intensified to break traditional stereotypes that inhibit good gender relations
- ❖ The education of the girl child should be given priority by all parents

According to the women folk, there is an unequal burden regarding household responsibility between men and women. Women are generally said to be responsible for: child care, cooking, laundry, firewood collection, some women also claim to be responsible for the cost of schooling of their children. On the other hand, men are said to be responsible for the feeding of the family with the contribution of the women. Some men also claim to be responsible for the cost of their

children's schooling, as well as their clothing and Medicare. A lot of lively discussion was generated as a result of the gender debate, with both men and women claiming various issues.

It was also recognized that compared to years gone by, the labor burden has now eased on women with the proliferation of labor saving devices of various sorts.

### **5:2: Way forward regarding gender:**

The following recommendations had been advanced as having the potential to improve gender relations in the communities:

- ✚ The education of both boys and girls
- ✚ The promotion of greater dialogue between men and women
- ✚ Regular holding of initiatives like the Youth Bantaba
- ✚ Greater use of the mass media to promote best practices

### **6:1: Closing remarks:**

In his closing remarks, the head of the village thanked all the participants for their active participation, and also praised Future in Our Hands and its development partners for promoting dialogue and understanding in the area. He urged participants to take the opportunity and make maximum use of the knowledge and new ideas they have gained from the Youth Bantaba. Bokary Jallow in his closing statements emphasized the need for participants to be vigilant regarding the education of their children particularly the girl child. He said opportunities like the one created by the Youth Bantaba are not always easy to have, hence the need to put the new ideas learnt into practice.