

**Exploring coastal community-led socio-economic development and conservation initiatives  
in The Gambia, West Africa.**

**Robin Rigby Trust – Final Report**

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**In Partnership with: The TRY Oysters Women's Association, The Gambia**

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## Background

I conducted this field research with women oyster harvesters in The Gambia, West Africa. The Gambia is one of the smallest countries in the African continent, surrounded by Senegal and with a population of about 2.4 million people as of 2021<sup>1</sup>. The Gambia comprises a strip of land (approximately 25 to 40km) on the north and south of the 480km of River Gambia, with almost every community having access to the river, which they use for various purposes<sup>2</sup>. Within the country, a significant economic livelihood activity is oyster harvesting which is done predominantly by local women around the Greater Banjul area.

Oyster harvesting in The Gambia is done traditionally with the use of an axe or hand to cut off the oyster attached to mangrove roots<sup>3</sup>. The women use small wooden canoes to harvest oysters and transport them to land (See Fig 1). However, just like many other coastal communities, the impact of environmental change poses myriad social, cultural, and economic challenges to these women<sup>4</sup>. Oyster seasons have become short and drastically reduced landing volumes over the years. There is a decrease in economic livelihood and food security challenges for many households depending on oysters.



**Fig 1.** Women in a canoe going for oyster harvesting in the mangrove

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/gambia-population/>

<sup>2</sup> Coastal Resources Center of the University of Rhode Island (CRC), The Gambian Sole Fishery: Towards MSC Certification and Use of an Eco-label- An-FIP like Process. [http://www.crc.uri.edu/download/RKF13\\_GambiaSoleFisheryMSCCert.pdf](http://www.crc.uri.edu/download/RKF13_GambiaSoleFisheryMSCCert.pdf), 2014

<sup>3</sup> Coastal Resources Center of the University of Rhode Island (CRC). Gambia-Senegal Sustainable Fisheries Program. [https://www.crc.uri.edu/download/Value\\_Chain\\_of\\_the\\_Artisanal\\_Oyster\\_2011.pdf](https://www.crc.uri.edu/download/Value_Chain_of_the_Artisanal_Oyster_2011.pdf), 2011

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-61788524>

To respond to these environmental challenges, the women are engaged in various community-led conservation initiatives to sustain the oyster harvesting business in The Gambia. In 2007, the government of The Gambia through its Fishery Policy Act instituted exclusive user rights privileges for the country's small-scale fishery, including oysters<sup>5</sup>. This policy gave the women powers to design and co-manage oyster harvesting and mangrove management. Some of the management practices included a mandatory eight-months close season for oysters. The women are only allowed to harvest oysters for four months in a year. The close season has to some extent, ensured the country's sustainability of oysters, including other mangrove regeneration activities coordinated by the women.



**Fig 2.** TRY Oyster women's Association signpost in Old Jeshwang community, The Gambia

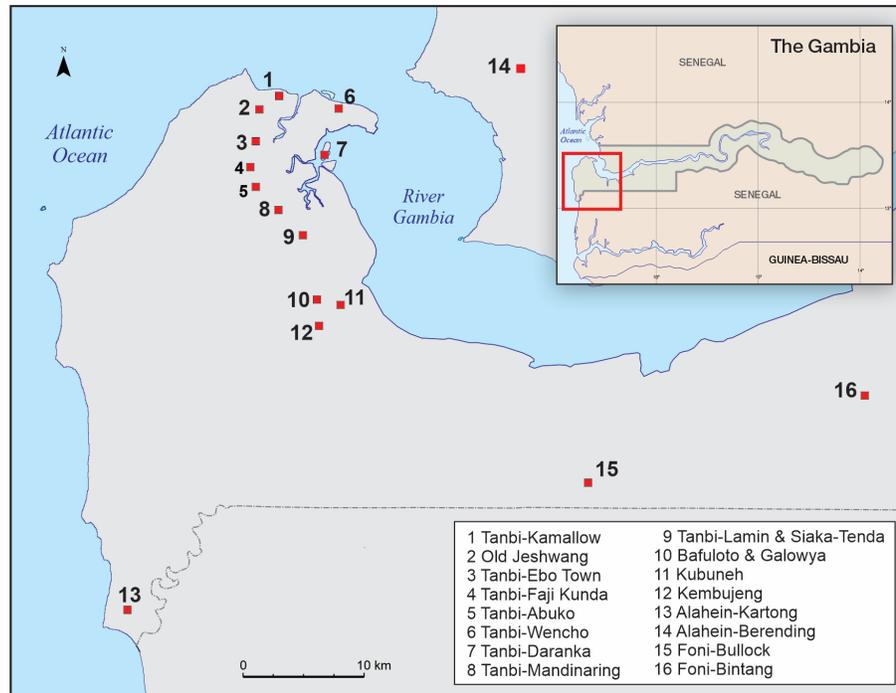
My field research was focused on a small women group in The Gambia, championing oyster harvesting activities called – the TRY Oyster Women's Association (TOWA) (See Fig 2). TOWA was established in 2007 by a prominent and eminent leader – Mrs. Fatou Mboob. She was motivated to recognize the oyster value chain in The Gambia and better the lives of women oyster harvesters. Thus, my project goals were: (1) To understand what influences the decision for women to join TOWA. (2) how has TOWA supported community-led conservation and sustainability activities for oysters and mangroves, and (3) What are some factors enabling or hindering community-led conservation activities for small-scale fishing actors in The Gambia?

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<sup>5</sup> USAID. Gambia-Senegal Sustainable Fisheries Project (USAID/BaNafaa) final report. [https://www.crc.uri.edu/download/BAN09\\_finalreport\\_508.pdf](https://www.crc.uri.edu/download/BAN09_finalreport_508.pdf), 2014

## Field approach

Field research was conducted between May 2021 – December 2021, the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a follow up research between February 2022 – June 2022. To facilitate the research process and research ethics approval, I collaborated with my community partner – TOWA, to hire four research assistants to assist with field research activities. The research assistants were all graduates from The University of The Gambia. Getting travel authorization was challenging, especially as The Gambia is not my country of origin. The initial plan was for me to spend at least one year in the country, with the first few months dedicated to learning *Wollof*, a local dialect spoken by people in the country, before proceeding with research and community engagement with TOWA members. Unfortunately, things didn't go as planned, and I had to rely on local research assistants. As presented in figure 3, a total of 275 TOWA members were surveyed using the Kobotoolbox online platform with interest in understanding various motivations and other push/pull factors that encourage people to join TOWA. Also, 23 semi-structured interviews with women oyster harvesters were conducted to get their experience in oyster harvesting, knowledge of oyster management, innovations and how TOWA is helping them.



**Fig.3.** A map of The Gambia showing the different communities we collaborated with women oyster harvesters

After conducting the survey and interview, a common issue that many spoke about was related to climate change – reduced sea level, drying up of some traditional oyster harvesting sites, and reduction in catch which is threatening their economic livelihood.

As a follow-up, I redesign a new set of survey questions to focus more on climate change, food security, and youth succession within the oyster value chain. The aim was to understand how climate change impacts and creates numerous changes in The Gambia. In addition to the people already surveyed, we further interviewed 119 women oyster harvesters and 104 youths to have adequate information on the various impact's climate change has on oyster harvesters and if the youths are willing to succeed their parents.

The results of all the data collected are being analyzed and will be presented in two different forthcoming manuscripts for scholarly peer-reviewed publications, namely:

1. Social innovation and small-scale fisheries in the blue economy
2. Climate change shocks, food security, and youth succession within the oyster value chain in the Gambia

### **Robin Rigby Trust specific questions**

#### ***Time***

**Was the time in the Field sufficient to accomplish your project objectives? Was the time spend on site optimum for the work, or would another season been more appropriate?**

Considering the global COVID-19 pandemic impacts on field research, I collaborated with local researchers and partners to achieve the project's objectives within the specified timeframe. One key lesson learned is the need for researchers to build strong relationships with communities/people they plan to do research with, utilize local expertise, and above all, create learning and capacity-building opportunities for the locals.

All the interviews and survey, including follow-up research, was done within the proposed timeframe, so there is no need for another time to go and conduct more research on the same issue. However, there are other future research activities that can be conducted with the women since as exploring livelihood alternatives for the women amongst others.

#### ***Replication***

**Would you consider it reasonable to repeat/replicate this project? If so what changes would you recommend in the planning or implementation? If not, why?**

Coastal communities continue to experience several impacts from environmental change, increasing the vulnerability of marginalized people. There are always existing and emerging challenges that women oyster harvesters in The Gambia face, which need more research work to be done. There is always the need for future research to understand the different climatic shocks to the economic livelihood and sustainability of coastal communities in The Gambia.

***Cooperation:* Cooperation may well have been integral to the project implementation. Are you aware of any cooperation skills you or any of those working with you acquired while in the Field? If so, please discuss and note how this skill will enhance your future working relations.**

Cooperation was a significant part of the overall success of the project. With strong connections and relationship with members of my host organization (The TRY Oyster women's Association), I was able to connect and work with other small oyster groups in 16 different communities in The Gambia. Cooperating with local actors and research assistants, especially within the current COVID-19 pandemic, helped facilitated research activities and collaboration. Local actors can quickly mobilize people and establish a comfortable work environment between the researcher and the people.

***Linkages:* The prime rationale of the Trust is to assist early-career researchers to have overseas coastal research experiences, and to improve existing or develop additional or new linkages with organizations and individuals focused on coastal resource assessment, development, and sustainable management. In Trust projects, people from different geographical areas and cultural backgrounds have on site opportunities to observe and assess both the natural and human resources. Did you forge linkages which will provide opportunities for further identification or resource development in the same or another coastal area?**

As a Cameroonian interested in coastal research, especially with people engage in small-scale fishing activities, this project was a great learning exercise. The Gambia is a small and unique country with the people very welcoming to researchers. Over the years of collaboration with fisherfolks in The Gambia, I have been able to connect with like-minded people championing natural resource management and conservation initiatives at the grassroots level. This linkage expands my social and professional network needed by any researcher.

***Sustainability:* Did your study/work in itself provide insight into sustainable resource management? If yes, please note how you or others you worked with might use this awareness to further develop and/or maintain sustainable human (particularly at the personnel level) and natural resources in the focus area.**

People in different geographical areas are aware to a certain extent of existing environmental challenges and are responding innovatively in different ways. In The Gambia, TOWA was established to help better organize the oyster value chain activities, i.e., from harvest to consumption. However, over the years, the women have been trained to harvest mature oysters and implement an eight-month close season to allow reproduction and growth of the oysters. Although this adds pressure to the limited economic livelihood for the women, they all see the close season to support the sustainable management of the oysters over the years. The women are also engaged in mangrove regeneration activities – replanting mangrove trees and also implementing other oyster cultivation activities.

Despite these efforts, the threats from climatic stresses such as drought present new challenges to the women regarding food security and sustaining their livelihood. Thus, there is a need for more discussions on livelihood diversification options and how to reduce dependency on oyster harvesting as the only income source for families.

## Conclusion

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions, research with the oyster women in The Gambia was enriching as I learned how to build collaboration and engage with people and communities I had never known before. I gain knowledge on how communities at the local level can mobilize efforts to ensure the sustainable management of natural resources. I would like to thank the Robin Rigby Trust and partners for this special fund to support researchers and practitioners worldwide to take up the challenges to explore coastal communities around the world. I am continuing work with the TOWA on activities related to social enterprise development and innovations, thanks to support and guidance from TOWA's leadership, including the development and publication of two manuscripts. I want to thank TOWA for the support in hiring research assistants and coordinating field activities. My research in The Gambia will be presented in the forthcoming Fourth World Small Scale Fisheries Congress on Cape Town, South Africa 2022, <https://www.4wsfcongress.com/africa-november-2022>.

## Appendix



**Fig 4.** Women processing oysters after harvest



**Fig 5.** Women removing the oysters from its shelf in a group at Kamalloh community, The GAMBIA



**Fig 6.** Artificial mangroves use to cultivate oysters (a) and oyster shelves (b)