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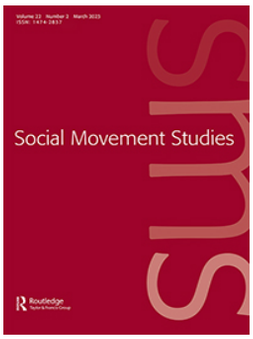

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PROFILE: extinction rebellion in the Gambia

Peter Gardner[a], Thomas O'Brien[a], Tiago Carvalho[b] and Olalekan Adekola[c]

[a]Department of Sociology, The University of York, York, UK; [b]Department of Political Economy, ISCTE - University Institute of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal; [c]School of Humanities, York St John University, York, UK

ABSTRACT

The emergence of Extinction Rebellion (XR) in 2018 as a global movement led to the establishment of chapters all around the world. Much existing work has focused on cases located in the UK, Western Europe and the Anglosphere. This profile presents a case study of the formation of XR in The Gambia as an example of further diffusion of the movement. We examine how partial democratisation opened up space for contention, which in turn led to the adoption of the XR brand in the country. In turn, becoming a chapter of XR has opened up new opportunities for the transnationalisation of Gambian environmental activism. The profile concludes by reflecting on the potential future of the group.

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Climate change; West Africa; environmental movements; The Gambia; extinction rebellion

The Gambia is listed among the top 100 countries most vulnerable to climate change (Huq & Ayers, 2007). In 2022 alone, the country witnessed both drought and flash flooding due to excessive rainfall (P. Saine, 2022; Wansi, 2022). It is estimated that the entire capital city will be lost through coastal inundation in the event of a 1-meter sea-level rise (Jallow et al., 1996). Agriculture represents the largest sector of the economy; however, swathes of the country's agricultural land are at sea level, and both crops and horticulture sectors are vulnerable to drought, unstable weather conditions, flash flooding and higher temperatures (Amuzu et al., 2018). Yet, in global comparative terms, The Gambia represents one of the lowest emitters of CO2 per capita (Ritchie & Roser, 2020).

In the late 2010s, the political context for environmental activism in The Gambia was transformed. With the end of Yahya Jammeh's rule, the country emerged out of more than two decades of authoritarian rule. New freedoms opened up the space for social movements. The Gambia's transition also coincided with a transnational proliferation of environmental movements responding to climate change, with the formation of Extinction Rebellion (XR herein), Fridays For Future, and others (Chase Dunn & Almeida, 2020). Prior to the creation of XR, a small group of agriculture students at the University of The Gambia had already begun organising, influenced by research on how climate change would affect Gambian society. Inspired by XR's actions in the UK, this group rebranded as XR Gambia in 2019 (see Gardner et al., 2022).

CONTACT Peter Gardner peter.gardner@york.ac.uk Department of Sociology, University of York, Law and Sociology Building, Freboys Lane, York YO10 5GD, UK

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Social movements in the Gambia

From 1994 to 2017, The Gambia was ruled by Yahya Jammeh. After initially seizing power as the leader of the 1994 coup d'état that overthrew President Dawda Jawara, Jammeh was elected President in the 1996 election (Perfect, 2010). Although both Presidential and National Assembly elections continued to take place throughout the period of his rule, critics of the regime describe this period as 'sembocracy': a portmanteau of democracy and sembo, meaning 'force' in the local Mandinka language (A. Saine, 2008). Elections under Jammeh were characterised by electoral manipulation and coercion, with pro-regime 'para-political organisations . . . acquir[ing] notoriety for intimidation and violence' (Hughes, 2000, p. 38). The regime was also responsible for considerable human rights violations, intended to silence 'media critics, opposition politicians and other civilians and, in particular, dissidents within the security forces' (Perfect, 2010, p. 58).

Throughout this period, social movements, protests, strikes and other forms of contentious politics were repressed and an atmosphere of fear built up around any form of critique of the regime. As one XR Gambia activist described it:

> The former regime was a brutal one: one that did not . . . entertain [protest]. . . . People were in a state of fear because there [were] police and investigators everywhere: even the next person to you - even your friend, you tend to think twice whether he is one of those or not. (XRGambia2)

Despite the risks, protests did occur periodically. In April 2000, the Gambia Students Union (GAMSU) organised a march to the capital Banjul to protest the abuse and subsequent death of two young people at the hands of the state (Ndow, 2022). They were met by military and police officers who opened fire on the demonstrators killing sixteen. A solidarity protest at a rural high school was met with similar force and followed by hundreds of arrests across the country. Demonstrations of this size were not seen again until the wave of democratisation protests in 2016 that precipitated the collapse of the Jammeh regime (Hultin, 2020).

With protest inside The Gambia restricted, considerable support was provided by international solidarity. In mid-2009, six Gambian journalists were sentenced to two years in prison for criticising the regime (Perfect, 2010). In response, Amnesty International organised a Day of Action, with demonstrations held in West Africa, Europe, and the US (Amnesty International, 2009). In light of international condemnation and protest, all six journalists were released the following month (Perfect, 2010). Similarly, Jammeh's vociferous opposition to homosexuality gave rise to various forms of contention from LGBTQ+ rights groups globally; a pressure to which the President refused to bend. In this way, social movements within The Gambia have benefited from international solidarity throughout the 21st century, an experience that has influenced the dynamics of environmental movements in the country.

Since 2017, The Gambia has seen civil society return and a burgeoning social movement scene begin to form. Under current President Adama Barrow, the country's record on human rights has markedly improved, and freedom of expression, assembly and association has been largely upheld (Perfect, 2022). There remain challenges, as Nabaneh (2022, p. 31) notes 'the government has yet to amend laws that curtail freedom of

expression and infringe on freedom of assembly'. The re-election of Barrow with an increased majority in 2021 was deemed by most observers to be free and fair but the President's apparent unwillingness to support the implementation of the 2020 Constitution has caused some concern over his future plans (Perfect, 2022). An attempted coup d'état in December 2022 also points to potential instability alongside public frustration with the lack of progress in undertaking reforms (ADF, 2023). It is in this context of uncertainty that the recent wave of global climate protests emerged.

A genealogy of XR Gambia

In spring 2018, six university students formed the Youth Advocacy Movement Against Climate Change (YAMACC). Having educated themselves about the effects of climate change on The Gambia, they began to raise awareness of the crisis through public talks, events, demonstrations, and engagement on social media. In the summer of 2018, YAMACC held a tree planting rally at which participants heard talks about climate change and planted trees as a form of prefigurative politics (YAMACC, 2018). After witnessing XR's Spring Rebellion in April 2019, YAMACC members sought affiliation:

> We saw the protest in 2019 where XR blocked the major London bridges and then they were able to force the government . . . to declare a climate and ecological emergency. . . . When we saw such a movement . . . we were inspired. . . . And that's how we got in touch with the international team to start up a group in The Gambia with their guidance. (XRGambia1)

By October 2019, XR Gambia was registered with XR as an official chapter. Adopting the XR label gave the movement name recognition on a global level and allowed them to continue and '[extend] the work that [they] were doing' (XRGambia2).

From its inception, the movement aimed to strike a balance between the global and the local in their activities. Given The Gambia's comparatively negligible level of carbon emissions and limited economic and political power, the global has been a key focus of their attention. Reflecting on this, one activist argued:

> If you look at nations that do not emit CO2 – I mean, very little CO2 – they are the nations that are hardest hit with the climate crisis. . . . We believe that if we all come together and send a clear message to these big emitters like the G7, the G20, they should be able to listen to our demands. (XRGambia1)

XR Gambia activists articulate an aim to balance this global focus with local considerations, contending that 'inasmuch as we emit very little, we believe that everyone has a responsibility' (XRGambia2). In practice, this largely meant educational projects with The Gambia's general public, many of whom are unaware of the climate crisis as a result of political and media silence on the issue, a lack of access to education, and low levels of internet connectivity in rural areas. However, XR Gambia has also engaged with political elites, advocating for stronger environmental policies and to 'make them understand that there is a crisis' (XRGambia02).

In 2019, the group also began participating in Fridays for Future's climate strikes. This was perceived as a tool for transnational protest, rather than a collaboration between separate social movement organisations. As one of the founding members of XR Gambia explained:

> If you want to take part in [Fridays for Future], you register, . . . and then they also know that, in some parts of the world, these people are also doing the strike with us. We have registered with them on several occasions and taken part also in it. Not a formal collaboration, but it is just . . . strengthening the movement so that it also reaches some parts of Africa. Because Gambia also is not that well known . . . it's remote! . . . Knowing that some part of Africa that is not that well known is taking part in the Fridays for Future movement also would strengthen [and] . . . show that Fridays for Future has wider coverage. (XRGambia2)

Crucially, taking part in climate strikes was viewed as 'a formal collaboration', but as a way to further strengthen the climate strike at the international level (XRGambia2). Participation was considered to be effective not only locally but also to strengthen the movement in the 'global north' where the high-emitter countries that put The Gambia's ecosystem at risk are located. This exemplifies XR Gambia's approach to environmental activism, an additive tactic where association and identification with different social movement organisations allows its activists to negotiate the local, regional and global dynamics of climate change advocacy.

Integration of the group into XR brought opportunities to scale up and transnationalise (Tarrow, 2011). Being a member of the XR 'Global South movement' group and Extinction Rebellion Affinity All-Afrikan Network (XRAAAN) provided XR Gambia with connections to a wide global network of environmental activists. XR Gambia has been able to develop strong ties across an international network of environmental groups, especially across Africa. One of our participants was part of a 'regional liaison working group' that supports the creation and growth of local XR chapters in Africa to 'make sure they are being heard and their advocacy is being covered'. He provided an example: 'So let's say if there's a campaign about oil exploration . . . in Botswana, we amplify each other's voices and try to send a message to the world that we are concerned about such destruction of biodiversity.' In this case, XR Gambia joined with XR groups in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda, Sudan, the UK and Canada to oppose plans by ReconAfrica – a Canadian multinational company – to drill for oil in Botswana's Okavango Delta. These collaborations demonstrate the opportunities offered by the XR label, creating a shared identity and sense of solidarity.

Being a movement in a young democracy comes with both opportunities and challenges. XR Gambia activists themselves perceived the Barrow government as 'very compromising, very open to freedom of expression, freedom of association' and the public as highly receptive to the movement. According to our interviewees, in contrast to the former regime, activists now are 'free to go out at any time of the day or night to any public meeting place, have our microphones, talk to people, . . . and have some members distributing flyers' (XRGambia2). Although the opening up of civil society has allowed for broader participation, mobilisation and protest remain hampered by the shadow of the Jammeh regime. XR Gambia's public demonstrations are often met with surprise by bystanders, for whom such phenomena have long been uncommon. Many of the repertoires and frames used by XR in the UK and elsewhere were deemed inappropriate for The Gambia, where 'civil disobedience' – including the tactic of mass arrest – has the potential to be misunderstood as 'something violent' (XRGambia1).

A further issue in the localisation of XR to The Gambia relates to terminology. In the UK and many other countries, the movement declares itself 'in rebellion' against the government, with individual people involved in XR commonly referred to as 'rebels'.

However, in The Gambia, these labels hold problematic connotations. The Casamance region of Senegal, on The Gambia's southern border, has experienced civil war since the early 1980s (Evans, 2007). In both countries, the term 'rebels' is used as a shorthand for the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance, a separatist paramilitary organisation. For XR Gambia, this association was an obstacle for the movement:

> Especially when you have a region severely affected by conflict . . . the word "rebel" might not be suitable for that region because people have encountered rebels in the media – these rebels, those rebels – so when they hear "XR rebels", they might think that these are a rebellion like an armed group, not knowing that we are rebelling against the climate and ecological crisis. So, [the] word "rebellion" brought in many, many issues. We've encountered it with many people, and I guess that's also a fear that is holding many people back. (XRGambia1)

As a result, the group became reticent about using such terminology, opting to describe themselves as 'XR' than 'Extinction Rebellion' and to avoid the label 'rebels'.

Overall, XR Gambia has emerged as an important voice against climate breakdown in the region. To do so, they have had to overcome a range of issues domestically (such as public reticence in a post-authoritarian state), internationally (e.g. The Gambia's geopolitical marginality), and within the social movement space (XR UK's problematic choice of terminology). Demographically, the movement is largely constituted of younger, educated male urbanites. Through 2022, the group undertook a concerted effort to mobilise and onboard new activists, focusing their recruitment strategy upon the urban, educated youth of Banjul. Concurrently, they have continued to build upon their trajectory of actions and advocacy. XR Gambia now stands as an important component of Africa's transnational environmental activist network.

Future prospects

The fall of the Jammeh regime provided an opening that enabled YAMACC and subsequently XR to emerge, as transition opened up space for contention to occur. At the same time, the extent of democratisation remains tentative and 'significant human rights issues remain' (Perfect, 2022, p. 154). Despite advances in political rights, restrictions on freedom of assembly and the rule of law continue to lag. The reality of this is reflected in the caution demonstrated by the activists in the use of certain terms and the wariness of the population to involve themselves in contentious actions. The legacy of the Jammeh regime continues to cast a shadow and the uncertainty associated with the newly democratic regime reduces the capacity for civil society groups to mobilise support.

At the international level there are greater opportunities, as demonstrated by the participation of XR activists in transnational organisations and actions. XR groups have also been formed across West Africa – including Senegal, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Nigeria – as well as in a further 11 countries in the rest of Africa (Gardner et al., 2022). While contact among activists across Africa appears strong, local groups face very different political realities. Nevertheless, beyond current mobilisations and activities, XR Gambia should be well-positioned to make contributions at local, regional, and global levels. Some of the changes campaigned for can be best achieved if local activists' voices are heard at

international fora, such as CoPs. This also draws on the longer-term ties and support cultivated under the more repressive Jammeh regime. As has been noted, adopting the XR label has enabled the group to demonstrate a connection with a global movement and attract attention that had previously been lacking. Translating this international recognition to the domestic sphere remains a considerable challenge for the group in the future, as they attempt to overcome reticence among potential supporters.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Peter Gardner is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of York. He is the author of two books: Ethnic Dignity and the Ulster-Scots Movement in Northern Ireland (Palgrave, 2020) and Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics (co-edited with Benjamin Abrams; The University of Michigan Press, 2023). His primary research interests include social movements studies, contentious politics, and the sociology of climate and ecological breakdown.

Thomas O'Brien is a senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of York. His research concerns democratisation, environmental sociology, political leadership, and social movements. Recent work has appeared in Identities, Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, and Eurasian Geography and Economics.

Tiago Carvalho is a researcher at the ISCTE-Lisbon University Institute. He holds a PhD in sociology from the University of Cambridge, and his research focuses on social movements, political parties and social classes. His current work spans from the housing movement in Lisbon to the dynamics of transnationalisation in Extinction Rebellion.

Olalekan Adekola is a senior lecturer in Geography at the School of Humanities, York St John University, United Kingdom. His research background is in geography and environmental sciences. He is an expert in climate resilience and adaptation and has conducted projects exploring community involvement in these areas.

ORCID

Thomas O'Brien http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5031-736X
Tiago Carvalho http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8189-9040
Olalekan Adekola http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9747-0583

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