



*An Arrey Ivo interview of Fatoumata Tambajang: former Gambian State minister of Health, Social Welfare and Women's Affairs.*

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### ***Introduction***

This interview was done in Bradford 2007 where Fatoumata Tambajang was studying at BCID, University of Bradford (2007) as a network initiative of the Director of the African Centre for Community and Development ([www.africancentreforcommunity.com](http://www.africancentreforcommunity.com)) with important development stakeholders from Africa in order to buttress possibilities of African inter-governmental and civil society cooperation after they must have left the United Kingdom for development responsibilities in their various countries. It exists in video and rights of publishing and broadcasting can be acquired by contacting the African Centre for Community and Development in any of the above listed addresses. This interview throws depth and insight on possible in-roads to African Development and poverty reduction from an experienced field worker who has contributed beyond measurement, time, efforts and skills towards the development of a sustainable health system in the Gambia as well as for the empowerment of women and the reduction of poverty in Gambia and Africa as a whole. She also worked with important stakeholders like UNDP, African Development Bank, World Bank etc towards these goals and is respected for works by many including her classmates in BCID who ended calling her “Mama” to intimate her protective and caring nature. This will be her first ever revelation in the media of her which to become president of Gambia.

### ***Talking with the Minister***

**Arrey Ivo:** “Good evening”

**Fatoumata:** “Good evening”.

**Arrey Ivo:** “Who are you?”

**Fatoumata:** “Fatoumata Tambajang”

**Arrey Ivo:** “And you come from which country?”

**Fatoumata:** “I come from the Gambia. Post Graduate student, BCID, Bradford University”

**Arrey Ivo:** “Before coming here what did you do in your country?”

**Fatoumata:** “I did quite a lot of things, including working with the United Nations Development Programme. I also worked with the government briefly as State Minister of Health, Social Welfare and Women’s Affairs and after so many years of practical work in the field of development I came to increase my knowledge and exposure and as you know the world is becoming more and more competitive and for women, we really need to have what it takes to work as partners with men in a male dominated world and Africa in particular”

**Arrey Ivo:** “So what are the health problems you think Africa is facing?”

**Fatoumata:** “Right now we have a number of health issues and some of them are basic. I think by this century if we had the commitment of our political leaders and the international community those things would have been addressed. Things like malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS...If you look around the world and Africa in particular the children are dying in their millions every day. If you also look at the infant and maternal mortality, it is increasing instead of decreasing despite all the efforts and the funding that international communities and governments are investing in those areas”

**Arrey Ivo:** “As Health Minister what things did you introduce in that sector in your country?”

**Fatoumata:** “When I started I did my best to bring on board the experience I gathered from UNDP and also in partnership with the World Bank, African Development Bank, Islamic Development Bank and other partners. What I did first was to look at what was on the ground because you can’t come and start everything afresh. I looked at what was on the ground because I knew government had a policy on the ground and programmes. I looked at them and tried to identify the gaps, in partnership with stakeholders including communities and we realised that we needed more efforts in terms of decentralisation of the health aspect, we needed more assistance in the area of social welfare because increasingly people are becoming more vulnerable because of the declining economies in my country, I also encouraged government to develop a new policy that would move the process forward and policy was formulated in concert with communities to the extent of even reaching out in terms of speaking the local languages, translating to local communities and explaining to them because they are the main stakeholders and they need to know what is being developed. They need to direct us. We need to be listeners as policy makers. Once the policy was developed it was acknowledged by World Health Organisation (WHO) as a model in Africa. From that point of view, we also tried to support the efforts of government to decentralise facilities and services particularly for the Health personnel. Increasingly we realised people were reluctant to move to rural areas because of limited housing, limited facilities and so we improved the sector too. The other aspect was to look at donors and funding in terms of increasing the facilities in the Central Hospital and also hospitals in the rural areas especially as Gambia has only 3 main hospitals, others being just health posts. We developed a strategy to develop and strengthen the capacity of the ministry, departments and health units in the rural areas and we did all these alongside some consultations on staff morale. So many times we realised government civil servants are underpaid and if you want to maximise the capacity of people we need to really give them incentives”.

**Arrey Ivo:** “As a former state minister are you still keeping the synergies you had with other ministers in Africa? Are you still working in some forum on development, child care, HIV/AIDS and so on?”

**Fatoumata:** “Yes. The Health policy of the Gambia that was developed in 1995 when I became minister has a major component on maternal and child health. It has a component on HIV prevention and control and we have components on tuberculosis, malaria, human capacity building, strengthening of institutions and we also have some resources for reaching out to other partners both internally and externally in terms of enriching our programmes particularly drawing on the experience of the Bamako Initiative which is mainly geared towards Millennium Development Goals, reducing infant mortality and reducing also poverty particularly among the vulnerable groups, and helping build the capacities of people through improving and enhancing their own initiatives on the ground in order that they can also overcome their own poverty. As you know poverty remains the major challenge in Africa, Gambia is not an exception. So through interaction and international conferences we attend, we think globally and when we come home we act locally, so that we can be attuned to the circumstances of the local reality”.

**Arrey Ivo:** “So why is Development Aid not working in Africa? Why are projects failing?”

**Fatoumata:** “Projects are failing because of a number of factors. One could be the environment in terms of policy environment, one in terms of the physical environment;

you also have the problem of resources and also governments' political commitment. If the political commitment is not to projects which is by way of having governments public funds finance projects and then allow the dynamics of projects to embrace international cooperation it will never be sustainable, because it will be depending on handouts rather than depending on our selves; so the local ownership is never there. And we know we are really working under the context of globalisation which is making more and more African countries and the Gambia vulnerable. Resources are scarce coupled with the fact that we find a lot of corruption in government, we find the lack of accountability and lack of transparency in the way public affairs are ran. People are not consulted. For example Public Expenditure Management Programme in the Gambia is just between the World Bank and government that is of course not unique. In other African countries you find that it is the World Bank that dictates and also Brettonhood institutions, international donors etc. Most programmes are donor driven hence unsustainability of projects on donor exit. We find so much invested on projects and they become white elephants. Some times you find that projects are duplicated instead of looking at why they failed and trying to remedy that. It is a duplication of efforts and resources. So Africa and Gambia in particular needs to look inwardly and see why projects fail and ensure that there is enough political commitment to make them succeed”.

**Arrey Ivo:** “Don’t you think industrialisation is an option?”

**Fatoumata:** “Yes industrialisation is an option that is why I said one thing Africa should think about its priorities and define its own priorities. For instance in local areas if we have cotton industries, build the capacities of farmers, if we give them subsidies within a given time frame, you increase their productivity and promote industrial development and you will find self-reliance. That brings me to the idea of developing the infrastructure. Infrastructure is very very poor. Communications, basic services like education, health etc is not available in most of the rural areas. In this century you would have thought that may be something as simple as electricity could be accessible and affordable but all these basic services which are fundamental human rights are not. We are the electorate and we put governments there and they must be accountable to us by providing these basic services that we need to help people develop not only themselves but also contribute meaningfully to development”.

**Arrey Ivo:** “You are in the United Kingdom, what do you miss about Africa?”

**Fatoumata:** “I miss a lot about Africa. Africa is my continent and I will never abandon her. I am here to study simply because I want to contribute meaningfully to the development of Africa and particularly in the area of the poor. I stand to advocate for the poor not necessarily only the most vulnerable like women and children but everybody that is poor needs a voice, a public voice, needs to be part and parcel of development and needs to own development. United Kingdom has so many talents and they are developing their country, my responsibility as an African and particularly an African woman is to go out there in Africa and join the dialogue. My voice could be a small voice but when you add one on one, it makes two. I am sure there are several hundreds of thousands of my kind and even better who also have that same commitment and I think together we could contribute to Africa moving from where she is today to a better place”.

**Arrey Ivo:** “Would you like to be something bigger than the Minister you have been?”

**Fatoumata:** “Of course I will like to become some day the president of my country. Not necessarily because of any other thing but because I am a citizen, I have worked for my

country, I have a constituency, I have respect in my country and the knowledge I am gaining here is good to add an impetus into my academic knowledge, my academic standing and I have the commitment of my people to help my people. So I am going into politics not necessarily because I want something to gain but because I want to contribute to my people. The assurance I will like to give to my people come the time would be that, there will be a tenure of office. I will never want to be president more than 10 years which is 2 terms. If my people say three years is a term of office, I will be there for six years. Even if they say one year is a term of office, it is unrealistic but I am just giving an example, to insist that I will not be there more than two terms because I believe if you cannot achieve in the first term of office, there is no way you can achieve in a second term. And we really need to advocate for democracy, genuine democracy where starting from the political leadership we would have a term of office then people would be more committed and have a practical agenda rather than perpetuating themselves. If you look at Africa today many of our political leaders come in grace and leave in disgrace. I don't think that is worth it. You need to be a leader, be committed to your people, do what you are supposed to do, you can never finish it, leave the stage for other people to continue and I think I have the chance because today the world is talking about the empowerment of women. Liberia has done it and I see no reason why Gambia cannot do it. So with the help of Allah, the Almighty and with the support of my people, the Gambians and particularly the support of Africans and African women and some people that are gender sensitive, I could become the president and would be one of the most efficient and effective presidents of Africa".

**Arrey Ivo:** "Thanks very much for talking to this programme and I hope that I will be able to see you take over as president and if not contribute your ideas, your wonderful ideas to the development and construction of Africa.

**Fatoumata:** "Thanks very much. You will be very welcomed. My prayer is never ever to be different to the friends I have today. So you will be most welcomed come the time. God bless you".

**Arrey Ivo:** "Thank you"

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