

### "Siding with the people" or "Occupying force"? Local perceptions of African Union and ECOWAS interventions in the Gambia

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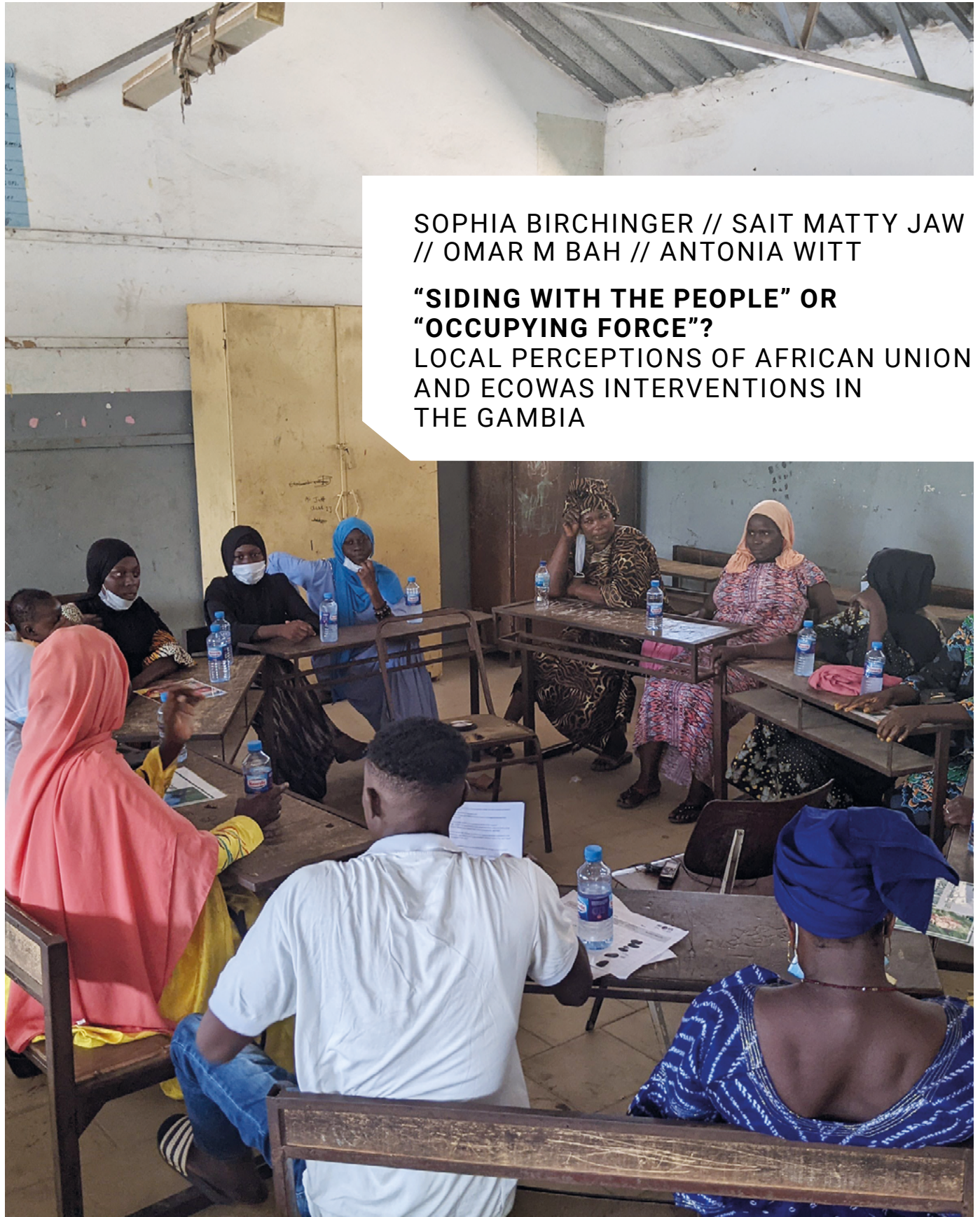
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# PRIF REPORT

PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE FRANKFURT / LEIBNIZ-INSTITUT HESSISCHE STIFTUNG FRIEDENS- UND KONFLIKTFORSCHUNG



SOPHIA BIRCHINGER // SAIT MATTY JAW  
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**“SIDING WITH THE PEOPLE” OR  
“OCCUPYING FORCE”?**  
LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN UNION  
AND ECOWAS INTERVENTIONS IN  
THE GAMBIA



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PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE FRANKFURT (PRIF)

**Cover:**

The picture shows a focus group in Bundung on a Saturday afternoon with women who usually sell products at the markets. © PRIF/Sophia Birchinger.

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African regional organizations have developed considerable agency through their interventions to build peace and defend democratic governance in their member states. Since 2002, the African Union (AU), together with its Regional Economic Communities (RECs), such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), responded to political and constitutional crises by military and non-military means in a total of 22 instances. The toolbox includes measures ranging from sanctions to mediation and, eventually, the threat and use of force. In doing so, the AU and ECOWAS shape political orders and impact the lives of people living in countries experiencing African regional interventions.

Despite a growing body of literature on the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), existing research has so far featured mostly an institutional and top-down approach to study African regional interventions. This approach has brought to the fore the assumption that African regional interventions enjoy public support due to their cultural and other kinds of proximity to intervention contexts. Yet, we know little about how those most affected by the interventions perceive and evaluate the AU and ECOWAS as such and, more concretely, their interventions. In the field of intervention research, scholars have studied the perceptions citizens hold vis-à-vis external interveners, but so far with a focus on multilateral organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) or individual Western states. Hence, a blind spot persists regarding the local imprint of and people's perspectives on African regional organizations and their interventions.

As part of a broader research project, this PRIF report examines the case of AU and ECOWAS interventions in The Gambia since 2016 by revealing Gambians' perceptions of the two regional organizations and, in particular, their interventions after the electoral defeat of Yahya Jammeh and the ensuing political crisis. So far, the Gambian case has been evaluated mostly as a success for global-regional alignment and "coercive diplomacy," with a special focus on the interventions' legality and the explanations about how and why military force was deployed. Yet, the concrete effects of and reactions to the interventions "on the ground" remain unclear. Consequently, we aim to answer two related questions: (1) What perceptions do Gambians of different social, political, and economic backgrounds hold about the AU/ECOWAS interventions and the two organizations more generally? ; and (2) What explains these different perceptions?

In a methodologically sound and empirically comprehensive approach, we conducted 11 focus groups and 85 interviews with Gambian citizens from various social strata. The collected data were analyzed to identify pertinent narratives about the AU and ECOWAS and their interventions in The Gambia. The field research in 2021/2022 as well as the analysis and writing were performed collaboratively by an international team of German and Gambian researchers.

Focusing on the AU and ECOWAS more generally, we find fundamental support for their founding idea ("one united Africa"), yet, at the same time, widely shared disappointment about how the AU and ECOWAS are (inconsistently) implementing their policies, and about their impact not being felt or generally perceived as far away. While the majority of our research participants hold only little formal knowledge about the mandate and scope of the regional organizations, we also see experiential



knowledge they have gained, namely through concrete encounters with the AU and ECOWAS, which shapes the perspectives Gambians hold vis-à-vis those organizations.

As to the intervention, we show that perceptions are multiple and complex, and at times even contradictory in The Gambia. We explain this complexity as resulting from spatial, temporal, and socio-political factors that affect how these African regional interventions are (differently) perceived. While the interventions are mostly evaluated positively as protecting the people (narrative 1), others describe them as an “occupying force” (narrative 2), questioning the necessity and legality of interventions as such. In contrast to these politicized perceptions, Gambians who are rather removed from the political discourse stress the “restoration of everyday peace” (narrative 3) thanks to the interventions. These first three narratives focus on the immediate response to the political crisis in 2016 and reveal a divide along political camps as well as between elite and everyday Gambians. In addition, the data suggest that a temporal parameter is also involved. As the presence of the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) endures even today, two competing narratives persist: On the one hand, some fear the “danger of a coup” (narrative 4) if the troops withdraw, while on the other hand, initial support for the intervention by now has turned into the narrative of ECOMIG “overstaying” its mandate and, in a more radical tone, “oppressing” Gambians (narrative 5). The role of Senegal as a major country contributing troops to ECOMIG remains the most contested issue, shaping how the intervention is perceived locally.

While confirming the positive evaluation of the interventions in the literature, the normative yardsticks for Gambians, especially non-elites, differ starkly from those employed in the literature. Besides, there is considerable erosion of support when it comes to the later, still ongoing phases of the intervention, which have the potential to negatively impact even positive evaluations of earlier phases in retrospect.

These findings have substantial implications for academia and practitioners alike. First, our analysis shows that studying interventions “from below” allows concrete, yet socially and spatially variegated effects of AU and ECOWAS conflict management to be identified on the ground. For the future study of interventions, this report offers an analysis of the complexity of local experiences and perceptions along parameters of space, time, and sociopolitical positionality. Finally, our results challenge the widely held assumption that African interventions are accepted locally due to their cultural proximity, as well as the dominant understanding that African interventions are less or even non-coercive.

For the AU and ECOWAS, the initial support for the intervention, including the use of force, suggests that similar and particularly consistent reactions to political crises may be called for in the future. The increasing criticism indicates that (1) more attention must be paid to the domestic and regional political dynamics, also as regards the composition and deployment of troops, as these shape the perceptions of an intervention, and (2) engagement and communication with the wider public should be strategically increased within and beyond intervention contexts.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is Friday morning before Jumu'ah prayers when we arrive in Kanilai. What was supposed to be a one-on-one interview turns into a spontaneous focus group discussion because 15 people show up, ready to talk about the interventions in their country by the two African regional organizations, the African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), particularly the military contingent stationed just outside their village. As we hold prayers and start with a round of introductions, a community elder kindly interrupts, saying he has questions for us. His hands unfold a crinkled piece of paper, and he reads: “What do the AU and ECOWAS even stand for? Why is ECOWAS here in Kanilai?”. This is what he wants to know from us.

This scene reflects a twofold phenomenon: on the one hand, African regional organizations like the AU and the ECOWAS, through their interventions to build peace and defend democratic governance, have an important local imprint. They are visible and create tangible realities in the everyday lives of people in countries that experience African regional interventions. On the other hand, the short encounter with the elder in Kanilai underlines the great disconnect between the two regional organizations and everyday citizens in their member states. This disconnect is also reflected in the knowledge production about African regional organizations and their interventions. Despite a growing body of literature on the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), we still know relatively little about the local imprint of and people's perspectives on African regional interventions (but see IRRI 2017; Sabrow 2017; Schnabel et al. 2022a; generally Witt/Khadiagala 2018).<sup>1</sup> This is what this report sets out to explore, based on an in-depth case study on local perceptions of the AU and ECOWAS interventions in The Gambia since 2016, which followed a contested presidential election and then incumbent Yahya Jammeh's refusal to accept his electoral defeat. Concretely, we ask two related questions: (1) What perceptions do Gambians of different social, political, and economic backgrounds hold about the AU/ECOWAS interventions and the two organizations more generally?; and (2) What explains these different perceptions?

We use the term “perceptions” to refer to the understanding and interpretation of concrete experiences (Talentino 2007: 156). Although perceptions are always subjective, they are at the same time socially negotiated and powerful. We use the term “local perceptions” to designate the multiplicity of perceptions of people living in an intervention country.<sup>2</sup> We deliberately use the term in its plural form to emphasize the simultaneous existence of different, sometimes divergent and even contradictory perceptions of the same event, here the AU and ECOWAS interventions since 2016. By “regional intervention” we mean any concerted effort by African regional organizations, including the continental AU and sub-regional organizations such as ECOWAS, to affect the political order within a member state, regardless of whether such efforts involve (non-)coercive means, regardless of the concrete

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1 In contrast, local perceptions and reactions to international interventions by the UN and Western states – France in particular – have led to a growing body of research (Karlborg 2014; Kohl 2015; Leib/Ruppel 2021; Müller/Bashar 2017; Pouligny 2006; Talentino 2007).

2 More specifically, perceptions of an intervention are concerned with how different local actors understand and interpret the overall objectives, concrete implementation, and outcomes of an intervention, as well as the responsible organization(s) behind it.

instruments used, and regardless of the primary objectives of such efforts. Therefore, the aim of this report is to explore in more detail the multiplicity of local perceptions of the regional interventions in The Gambia since 2016 and to understand how different experiences affect these perceptions.

The Gambia intervention is just one of 22 instances in which the AU, usually accompanied by the respective Regional Economic Community such as ECOWAS, responded to political and constitutional crises or coups d'état since 2002 with the goal of "restoring constitutional order" (Souaré 2014; Witt 2020). As foreseen by their doctrines, in such cases, AU and ECOWAS intervene primarily through mediation and diplomacy. However, they can resort to coercive measures such as sanctions and the threat or application of violent means, as well as by suspending the state concerned from their organizations (African Union 2004; African Union 2007; ECOWAS 2001).

In this context, the case of The Gambia is special in two regards: First, because it is one of only two<sup>3</sup> cases that was accompanied by a military intervention. In The Gambia, the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) was deployed in order to lend more force to regional demands for Jammeh's withdrawal (Ateku 2020; Hartmann 2017; Williams 2017). Second, the intervention is special because it developed into a long-term presence of ECOWAS military forces in the country, such that its aims clearly go beyond the mere "restoration of constitutional order." As we will demonstrate in this report, both aspects have an important impact on the overall perceptions of the AU and ECOWAS interventions and thus provide a crucial building block for further comparative studies along the spectrum of (non-)military African regional interventions.

These particular circumstances have also shaped the hitherto academic engagement with this case. Until today, the scholarly literature has focused, on the one hand, on contextualizing why ECOWAS decided to deploy a military force in this particular case (Ateku 2020; Hartmann 2017) and, on the other hand, on discussing the international-regional division of labor behind and the legality of this decision (Babatunde 2017; Kreß/Nußberger 2017). By and large, the regional intervention is assessed in the academic literature as a success of global-regional alignment and ECOWAS' effective use of "coercive diplomacy" (Ateku 2020; Williams 2017) to enforce regional norms. Over time, however, survey data from Afrobarometer indicate a sharp increase in Gambians wishing that ECOMIG would leave the country, from 28% (2018) to 78% (2021).

The report builds on a qualitative study which, in turn, is based upon field research conducted collaboratively to study the effects and local perceptions of AU and ECOWAS interventions in detail. It is based on 11 focus groups and 85 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021/22 in different urban and rural parts of the country. With this report, the authors intend to present the key narratives emerging from the data collected and to open up avenues for further analysis and practical implications.<sup>4</sup>

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3 The second case is Guinea-Bissau.

4 A PRIF Report from the same research project has already been published, covering the case of the AU/ECOWAS intervention in Burkina Faso 2014/15 (Schnabel et al. 2022a; Schnabel et al. 2022b).

The report shows a widespread appreciation of the interventions but also starkly diverging perceptions of their legitimacy, necessity, and outcomes. Concretely, we demonstrate that Gambians’ perceptions of the AU and ECOWAS interventions are manifold, reflecting the broad spectrum of how elite and everyday Gambians of different backgrounds experienced and thus evaluate the regional interventions.

Both for the initial response to the 2016/17 “impasse”<sup>5</sup> and the continuing military presence of ECOWAS, we discovered competing narratives: one highly appreciative (“Siding with the People”) and the other fundamentally questioning the legitimacy and effects of the AU/ECOWAS interventions (“Occupying Force”). We also note a crucial disconnect between the way everyday Gambians experience and evaluate the interventions as opposed to elite Gambians, which has yet to be adequately reflected in the academic literature.<sup>6</sup> After all, a temporal component comes out quite clearly: While the initial intervention was predominantly perceived positively, only a minority believes that the continued presence of ECOMIG is necessary to avert another coup d’état. For the majority of our research participants, ECOMIG is an “overstaying” if not an “oppressing” force. While these findings substantiate the Afrobarometer data from 2021, we take them a step further and explain this overall divergence in perceptions by means of temporal and spatial aspects as well as those of political and socio-economic positionality. In doing so, we demonstrate that which phase of an intervention is assessed by whom and where matters crucially for understanding the multiplicity of local experiences and assessments of interventions.

This report is structured in six chapters. After this introduction, we discuss the methodological approach as well as the data on which this report builds. Chapter three provides some context to the regional interventions since 2016, explaining the build-up to what became known in The Gambia as “the impasse” as well as the immediate reactions of the AU and ECOWAS to the crisis. The fourth and fifth chapters then present the empirical heart of this report, first mapping the general perspectives Gambians hold about the AU and ECOWAS as organizations, and then presenting the main perceptions elite and everyday Gambians have about the regional interventions. In the conclusion, we summarize our empirical findings and spell out what they mean for both the future study and conduct of regional interventions.

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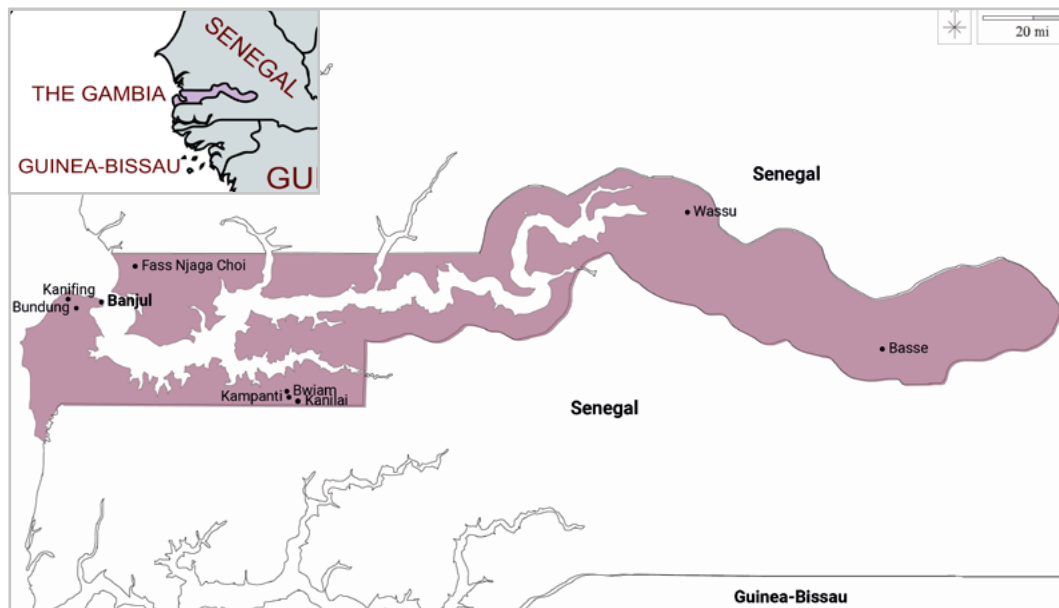
5 In The Gambia, the term “impasse” is widely used to describe the post-election crisis in 2016/17. Yet it also bears a politicized and thus contested meaning which is why we place the term in quotation marks: Critics of the interventions would argue that there was never an “impasse,” as the constitution allowed for a transition of power until January 19 (see chapter 5.3). Hence, particularly for some of those close to Jammeh, there was no “impasse.” They would even rhetorically ask, “What is this impasse?”. For them, it is more accurate to refer to the period from January 19 to 21, 2017 as the actual dates of the “impasse.” On why the post-election situation was considered an “impasse” nonetheless by President-elect Adama Barrow, see Halifa Sallah (January 16, 2017), who offers a detailed interpretation of the constitution from the standpoint of Coalition 2016: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkiulFf\\_OmA&list=PLQP-Loj6xgeYg2YViMioSxTj9T-EXKn5nY&index=45](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkiulFf_OmA&list=PLQP-Loj6xgeYg2YViMioSxTj9T-EXKn5nY&index=45). In this report, however, we adopt the broad definition of the “impasse” from the election in December 2016 to January 21, 2017.

6 (Ordinary) Citizens, non-elites, locals, everyday people – these are attempts to refer to a part of society that does not hold political offices or other elevated societal positions. This part of society tends to have restricted access to resources (economic, networks, etc.) and is distant from the formal center(s) of power. Acknowledging that each of the listed words comes with some baggage, we decided to stick with the wording “elites” and “everyday citizens.” Aware of the overlap inherent in these labels, we want to make explicit how differently they experience interventions.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This report presents key findings emerging from two phases of data collection in The Gambia, one in October and November 2021 and the other from February to April 2022. In that time, the research team conducted 11 focus group discussions (Hennink 2007) and 85 semi-structured interviews (Kvale 2007). These were complemented by ethnographic elements such as observation and immersion in order to unearth the multiple perspectives Gambian citizens hold on the AU and ECO-WAS as well as their interventions. While interviews allowed us to establish comprehensive factual knowledge about the transition period and to learn about individuals' experiences, the focus groups created space for discussions from which (dis)agreements and, thus, a wide scope of (polarized) perspectives emerged.

The research team collaborated to collect the data in the Gambian capital of Banjul, in more sub-urban parts of the Greater Banjul Area (GBA), and across the country in semi-urban and rural areas, such as Kampanti, Bwiam, and Kanilai in the region of Foni, and in Basse, Wassu, and Fass Njaga Choi (see map). Interviews were conducted by Omar M Bah and Sophia Birchinger at times together or separately, while Sait Matty Jaw and Karamba Jallow moderated the focus groups. The research logistics, transcription, and translation of audio recordings were facilitated by research assistants.



Map: The Gambia is often referred to as the tongue in Senegal's mouth as it is surrounded by Senegal with the exception of the shoreline. The maps also shows the locations where focus groups took place. Source: <https://d-maps.com> and <https://www.mapchart.net/africa.html> (personal editing).

To gather a wide scope of perceptions, research participants came from all walks of life. For focus groups, the strategic selection of research participants ensured variation within and across groups, while at the same time creating homogeneity within groups to put participants at ease (see Table 1). In doing so, the idea was to collect diverse accounts while simultaneously aiming for a balance of gender, age, socio-economic status, and political affiliation. For interviews, research participants were selected according to the snowball principle. Based thereon, commonly identified blind spots were proactively illuminated by establishing new contacts. Most research participants were contacted directly by phone, text message or WhatsApp, at times by formal written letter. Prior to the interviews and focus groups, participants were informed about the context of the project, the careful and anonymous handling of personal data, and the guarantees that participation is voluntary and consent to participate can be withdrawn at any point in time. As participants were free to choose their preferred language, we ended up with contributions in English, Wolof, Mandinka, Fula, and Jola. Despite the attempt to strike a balance, we realized that our research would not be able to overcome societal facts such as the gender imbalance in the Gambian parliament, and would thus partly reproduce a patriarchal view in our data – even though we specifically made efforts to include more women in our research. To the greatest possible extent, the interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed and, if necessary, translated for the ensuing analysis.

FOCUS GROUP	DESCRIPTION	PLACE	DATE
Former opposition parliamentarians	Mixed age, gender, experience	Kanifing, GBA	11/05/2021
Former APRC* parliamentarians			04/16/2022
Civil society			11/01/2021
Informal sector employees			03/06/2022
Youth			11/03/2021
Market women	Mixed age	Bundung, GBA	11/13/2021
Youth	Rural, aged < 30 years	Fass Njaga Choi, North Bank	03/13/2022
Adults/Elders	Rural, aged > 30 years	Wassu, Central River	03/12/2022
Community members	Pro-Jammeh constituency; mixed age, gender, socio-economic status	Bwiam, West Coast	03/10/2022
Community members	Pro-Barrow constituency; mixed age, gender, socio-economic status	Basse, Upper River	03/12/2022
Community members	Rural, ECOMIG presence	Kanilai, West Coast	03/25/2022

Table 1: Overview of the focus groups conducted in 2021/22 and of the systematic selection criteria for participation.

\* The Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) was founded to support Yahya Jammeh’s candidature in the 1996 elections and was the governing party from 1996 to 2016.

	INTERVIEW PARTNERS CAME FROM	EXAMPLES
22	Political elites	(Former) ministers and members of parliament, party executives, heads of communities (alkalos)
33	Civil society	Human rights defenders, (community) development organizations, activists, artists, business holders
12	Journalists	Newspapers, online media, broadcasting
9	Security personnel	Military officers from different ranks
4	Religious leaders	Muslim and Christian communities
5	AU/ECOWAS/ECOMIG	African Commission of Humans and Peoples' Rights, ECOWAS Permanent Mission, ECOMIG

Table 2: Quantification and overview of major clusters of interview partners.

The research was conducted collaboratively by Gambian and German researchers throughout data collection, data analysis, writing up, and disseminating the findings. The collaborative aspect allowed us to see what we could not have seen alone. For example, upon reflection within the research team, we were able to realize and use our individual positionalities strategically to approach research participants and discuss observations. As a result, we overcame the insider-outsider binary since all of us were insiders and outsiders at various points in time.

Methodologically speaking, perceptions are not opinions but reflect interpreted experiences. Bound together, they become collective stories about certain actors and events. Hence, a narrative inhibits shared perceptions, evaluations, and emotions or, in other words, a common process of making sense of a lived-through life reality (Gadiner et al. 2014: 9–10). Narratives help to understand how a society experienced a particular period in history. For peace and conflict research, analyzing narratives provides a means to understand local perceptions of conflicts and external interventions (see also Hellmüller 2013; Mac Ginty/Firchow 2016; Witt 2021).

In the case of this research, Gambians hold perceptions of the AU and ECOWAS interventions since 2016 based on their experiences. In a common process of making sense of what has happened, more comprehensive narratives emerge. Even during the early phases of field research, the team collected first impressions for analysis in team meetings. During the actual data analysis, performed by inductively coding the transcripts and then through virtual discussions about the collected dataset, the research team systematically carved out pertinent narratives (see chapters 4 and 5).

### 3. THE INTERVENTION CONTEXT

On December 1, 2016, Gambians were called to vote for a new president. The two candidates with the best chances to win were the sitting President Yahya Jammeh and opposition candidate Adama Bar-



row, running for Coalition 2016.<sup>7</sup> Yahya Jammeh had ruled The Gambia for 22 years since 1994, turning the country into an increasingly authoritarian state (Saine 2009). Only few would have expected his electoral defeat. Yet, to the great surprise of many, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) announced on December 2, 2016 that Adama Barrow had won the election by 43.3%, with Jammeh obtaining 39.6% of the votes (Hartmann 2017: 86). After initially conceding his electoral defeat, a week later Jammeh withdrew his acceptance of the result. The consequence was a severe post-election crisis, often referred to as “the impasse,” which was only defused through concerted multilateral efforts led by the AU and ECOWAS and backed by the United Nations (UN).

### 3.1 THE “IMPASSE” AND THE FALL OF YAHYA JAMMEH

Understanding the perceptions Gambians hold vis-à-vis the interventions requires more background on The Gambia’s role in the region, the 22-year rule of Yahya Jammeh, and the election in 2016 that elicited the interventions by the AU and ECOWAS.

With Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara serving from 1965 to 1994 as Prime Minister and, after Independence, as President of The Gambia, the country developed into a multi-party democracy and, for that reason, enjoyed a good reputation in the region. In 1987, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) was inaugurated in The Gambia’s capital Banjul; in 1990, The Gambia was a founding and contributing member of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) established to intervene in the Liberian conflict. After his fifth reelection in 1994, Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara was ousted in a military coup led by Lieutenant Yahya Jammeh, who was then elected President of the Second Republic in 1996.

In the 22 years to follow, Yahya Jammeh not only promised that he was prepared “to rule for one billion years” (BBC 2011b), he also ruled with an iron fist. Transforming himself into a civilian, Jammeh contested and won four elections in 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2011 (Nzally 2018). A term limit that was foreseen in the draft constitution of 1996 did not materialize in the version put to a referendum in 1997 (Jobarteh 2018). Although he was credited for the socioeconomic transformation of the country, including the founding of the first university and the expansion of education, anthropologist Aminata Ndow contends that “for 22 years, power, violence, the law, religion and mysticism were intertwined and structured everyday life” (Ndow 2021: 7). Afrobarometer data show that 28% of Gambians say they or a member of their family suffered from human rights abuses under Jammeh’s rule. The violations suffered include arbitrary arrest or detention without trial, torture, rape, intimidation by state agents, state-sponsored murder, wrongful dismissal, disappearances, destruction, and confiscation of property, among others (Afrobarometer 2018). Evidence from the Gambian Truth Reconciliation and Reparation Commission confirmed that more than 200 individuals were murdered by the state during Jammeh’s rule.

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7 Coalition 2016 consisted of seven presidential candidates plus Dr. Isatou Touray as the only independent female candidate.

Beyond his poor human rights record and near elimination of freedoms for civil society and the media, Jammeh also turned away from multilateral fora: Not only did he announce The Gambia's withdrawal from the Commonwealth and the International Criminal Court, he eventually declared The Gambia an Islamic Republic. Over the years, Yahya Jammeh was increasingly abandoned by his regional colleagues and accused of disparaging the region (Hartmann 2017: 94). Jammeh's electoral defeat was therefore celebrated by the majority of Gambians and beyond as it marked the end of his dictatorship (Jaw 2017).

For three reasons the December 2016 election was thus one of the most consequential in The Gambia's political history: First, Jammeh's defeat at the polls marked the first electoral turnover in the country's history. Second, it marked the end of Jammeh's two-decade dictatorship characterized by egregious human rights violations. Third, it brought The Gambia to the global limelight as a case for intervention by regional organizations.

A few days after conceding defeat, Yahya Jammeh backpedaled, announcing that he would not accept the election results (Hultin et al. 2017), thus marking the beginning of the "impasse." In the meantime, the IEC had published updated election results as they noticed a tabulation error in the region of Basse. In a televised address, Jammeh announced that he was annulling the results of the election due to irregularities discovered following the announcement of the initial results: "I want to make it very clear in the same way I accept the results on the basis that the IEC is independent, I will not accept the result. I reject the results" (Akwei 2016). This was shocking to Gambians and was instantly interpreted as an attempt by Jammeh to usurp the mandate of the people.

Although the change in power was long-awaited and began opening up the political space (Njie/Saine 2019), the actual post-election situation left Gambians in limbo (Hultin 2020). What followed were weeks of increasing uncertainty and peaceful resistance to Yahya Jammeh's intention to stay in power: Shops were closed, Gambians did not go to work, and some basic goods became scarce. The few civil society actors, such as staff associations of the University of The Gambia as well as the Gambian Bar Association, among others, issued statements, and the largely youth led #GambiaHasDecided Movement came together. The co-chairs of Coalition 2016, Fatoumata Jallow Tambajang and Halifa Sallah, among other political and religious leaders, urged for calm during planned public protests against Yahya Jammeh. Chief of the Defense Staff Ousman Badjie even briefed the military to remain calm, arguing that the issue was political and should be solved politically.

While a tense calm emerged, the army set up checkpoints at critical street junctions and deployed heavy weaponry. In doing so, they were perceived to be siding with sitting President Yahya Jammeh. At the same time, the AU and ECOWAS were working with the UN through all diplomatic channels.

### 3.2 THE AU AND ECOWAS INTERVENTIONS SINCE 2016

In this situation, the AU and ECOWAS became involved in Gambian politics in three different time-frames, namely before, during, and after the “impasse,” which, as we will elaborate further in chapter 5, are also articulated as distinct periods that are perceived quite differently by Gambians.

Before the “impasse,” the AU and ECOWAS focused on preparatory (background) support accompanying the election process: The AU sent a team of election observers and issued corresponding communiqués expressing support for peaceful elections. However, ECOWAS, for its part, had refused to send election observers to The Gambia since 2011, citing that The Gambia did not cultivate an environment conducive to organizing credible elections (BBC 2011a). Still, there was a joint UN-AU-ECOWAS mission with UN Special Envoy for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) Ibn Chambas ahead of the elections. Critical voices from civil society see the “impasse” partly as a consequence of ECOWAS neglecting The Gambia for several years and not engaging Yahya Jammeh sufficiently to bring him back onto a democratic path, and hence failing to uphold their otherwise strong stance for good governance.

During the “impasse,” while Gambians were defending their votes, international pressure was swift and Jammeh’s U-turn statement attracted not only criticism, but serious diplomatic and later even military mobilization (see generally Williams 2017). Through joint efforts led by ECOWAS, the AU, and the UN, the international community actively participated in restoring stability and ensuring a peaceful transfer of power using both soft and hard power. The first approach adopted by ECOWAS, the AU and UN was diplomatic negotiations. As the AU had deployed an election observation mission, it was more readily available when the results, Jammeh’s defeat and his subsequent U-turn were announced. As early as December 12, the African Union Peace and Security Council issued a communiqué stating that “it is determined to take all necessary measures in accordance with all AU instruments, in ensuring compliance with the results of the December 1, 2016 elections,” referring to the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (African Union 2016). In comparison, ECOWAS, having no election observers on the scene, arrived only after the mobilization of the AU.

During the further course of the “impasse,” however, it was ECOWAS that played the more active, indeed, the leading role in the intervention. In addition to Liberia’s President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, ECOWAS appointed a high-powered mediation team composed of former or sitting presidents from anglophone West Africa. The members of the delegation that engaged Jammeh included the then recently defeated Ghanaian President John Dramani Mahama and President Muhammed Buhari of Nigeria, who were appointed by ECOWAS as the lead negotiators, as well as President Ernest Bai Koroma of Sierra Leone (Tukur 2017).

On December 13, three days after Jammeh’s U-turn, the delegation, accompanied by UNOWAS representative Ibn Chambas, met with the defeated president for the first time. Unable to sway Jammeh, ECOWAS released a statement on December 17 stating its full support for Barrow and warned that it “shall take all necessary measures to strictly enforce the results of the December 1, 2016 elections” (ECOWAS 2016). As early as mid-December, contingents from ECOWAS member states,

namely Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal, assembled at the Gambian-Senegalese border. As an initially planned contingent from Sierra Leone never materialized, the number of Senegalese troops was increased instead. The prominent role of Senegal in the ECOWAS mission was neither a coincidence nor uncontroversial. Except for a short-lived Senegambian Confederation from 1982 to 1989, the relationship between The Gambia and Senegal had been tense, particularly under Jammeh's rule. A special focus is on the region of Casamance in the South of Senegal, where a separatist movement operates and has been in conflict with the Senegalese government for decades, allegedly supported by Yahya Jammeh.

In early January 2017, the ECOWAS team of mediators organized a second trip to further engage Jammeh, again without success. Afterwards, the ECOWAS Commission released an ultimatum demanding that Jammeh leave office or face the consequences (Williams 2017). This was underlined by Nigerian marines appearing on the shore off Banjul and Nigerian jetfighters flying over the State House. Although the ultimatum demanded that Jammeh leaves by midnight on January 19, this deadline was subsequently extended twice (Ateku 2020). For reasons of protection and to support the setup of the new government, Adama Barrow was airlifted from The Gambia to attend the ECOWAS Meeting of Heads of States.

On January 19, President Barrow was sworn in at the Gambian embassy in Dakar. Just a few hours later, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution that recognized President Barrow as the duly elected president and condemned Jammeh's attempt to thwart the electoral process. The council urged ECOWAS and the AU to work on the situation "by political means first" (United Nations 2017), which meant "no express authorization for military intervention" (Svicevic 2018: 55) but a de facto backing of all ECOWAS efforts to come. Following a series of engagements with ECOWAS without any signs of progress, President Alpha Condé of Guinea and Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz engaged Jammeh and brokered a deal in the name of ECOWAS, the AU and UN, which led to Jammeh's final exit into self-exile in Equatorial Guinea on January 21, 2017.

With the "impasse" at an end, ECOWAS ordered the intervening force known as the ECOMIG, code name "Operation Restore Democracy," to cross the border from Senegal into The Gambia. ECOMIG crossed the border along with a small Gambian military contingent which had joined them a few days earlier on Senegalese territory. Without initially spelling out the mandate of ECOMIG any further, ECOWAS decided to "take all necessary measures to strictly enforce the results of the December 1, 2016 elections" (ECOWAS 2016). It was only on January 31 that General François Ndiaye, ECOMIG's force commander, detailed the mandate in a press conference, namely to uphold the election results, to ensure the transition of power and swearing in of Adama Barrow as President, and to ensure the safety of the president, other political leaders, and the entire population (Williams 2017). The contingents have their headquarters in Bakau and further permanent deployments at the port in Barra as well as in Yundum opposite the airport. The State Guards at the State House are also supported by a Senegalese contingent. Additionally, there are two deployments in the region of Foni, namely a checkpoint in Bwiam and a camp in Kanilai, close to the Senegalese region of Casamance. Since a Senegalese contingent of ECOMIG is stationed there, this further contributes to the politicization of

the regional intervention and nourishes the perception that the Senegalese troops are there for their own national interest (see chapters 5.1 and 5.5).

Since the initial deployment, ECOMIG’s mandate has been renewed several times (Ceesay 2020), most recently in December 2022. This last renewal instructed the Commission “to consider, within that period, a gradual downsizing of the Mission and commence the training and reorientation of The Gambia Defence and Security Forces to enable them to play their constitutionally assigned roles in a democratic dispensation” and “to ensure that the ECOMIG Force composition reflects a balanced regional outlook comprising troops from the ECOWAS Members States beyond the current countries participating in the Mission” (ECOWAS 2022: 8). If implemented, these recent changes will address key points of criticism (see chapter 5) that are raised in Gambians’ perceptions of AU and ECOWAS and their interventions.

#### **4. GENERAL PERSPECTIVES ON AU AND ECOWAS**

Before diving deeper into the AU and ECOWAS interventions, this chapter takes a more general look at perspectives on those two organizations, both of which The Gambia is a member state. What do Gambian citizens know about the AU and ECOWAS? And how do they evaluate their work in general? While we find fundamental support for their founding idea (“one united Africa”), at the same time, there is widely shared disappointment about how the AU and ECOWAS are (inconsistently) implementing their policies, as their impact is not felt or generally perceived as far away.

It is often said that citizens hold no or little knowledge about the AU and ECOWAS (Olapade et al. 2016). Even research participants themselves say they do not know much about these institutions, and our interviews and focus groups confirm that Gambians have only basic and little formal knowledge about the institutions. We asked what respondents generally associate with the two organizations. While older generations across the country still know about their Pan-Africanist background, younger generations focus more on the continental reach of the AU and ECOWAS’ regional focus on West Africa. Generally, respondents tend to group the AU and ECOWAS together, as evident in the usage of terms such as “they,” and portray them as performing the same functions, including “promoting peace.” In more detail, however, ECOWAS is seen to be geographically and “culturally” closer to The Gambia than is the AU, which is referred to as more a distant organization. This appears prominently in the data, as most research participants usually referred to “AU and ECOWAS” but then continued to talk about ECOWAS, signaling their point of reference.

Optimistically, it is assumed that the AU and ECOWAS “are bodies that are set up by Africans for them to help each other within themselves” (student, focus group, rural youth, Fass Njaga Choi, March 13, 2022). This is particularly true during “conflicts or confusions,” as a young teacher put it (teacher, focus group, rural youth, Fass Njaga Choi, March 13, 2022). This kind of broad knowledge goes back to what Gambians learn at school. Knowledge becomes more specific when research participants talk about the actual impact AU and ECOWAS have on their everyday lives, and, thus, their immediate experiences with the organizations. This includes some AU and ECOWAS protocols, most

prominently the protocol on free movement of people, goods, and services. In this context, elites who travel abroad and everyday Gambians who trade goods across the border to Senegal report their (mixed) experiences with the ECOWAS ID/passport. Other concrete encounters with AU and ECOWAS, such as training sessions and workshops, are open only to elites and aspiring youths. A much more widely experienced encounter was the AU summit held in The Gambia in 2006: Because it created jobs and many arrivals/departures at the airport and traffic on the streets, it is the vivid (and sometimes only) point of reference of AU and ECOWAS for everyday Gambians.

For general perspectives on the AU and ECOWAS, we deduce from our collected data three different evaluative narratives about the two organizations. In the first narrative, both the AU and ECOWAS are described as rather incapable “toothless bulldogs,” as a school principal in Fass explained:

Well, firstly, what comes to my mind is that, um, on the surface it seems to be something that is very good and positive and that we can get a lot of benefits from it. Err, but looking at it deeper, we tend to see that many times, we see them as toothless bulldogs, err, which cannot do much for the benefit of the people. So, it's almost like a club of the leaders, the presidents, um, where they meet and discuss and protect each other and stuff like that. That is, when we consider it deeper, that is what it turns out to be, yes (school principal and leader of a religious minority group, interview, Fass, March 13, 2022).

While this understanding largely draws on a perception of limited actual capacities, inaction is also often interpreted as an unwillingness to act, indicating a perception that the two organizations are biased towards protecting and serving only the interests of incumbent presidents (see also Schnabel et al. 2022a).

A second, equally pertinent narrative sees the AU and ECOWAS as generally necessary organizations but focuses on the weak implementation record of adopted policies. Under this group, The Gambia's membership in international bodies was generally seen to be beneficial for the country, as belonging to such organizations is important for the country's status and recognition in the world. For ECOWAS in particular, research participants listed trade and the principle of free movement of goods and services as a benefit. However, respondents also perceive the organizations to be weak in terms of implementation and are concerned about the quality of services.

According to the third narrative that emerged from the data, research participants described the two organizations in relation to the clear benefits they registered from the regional bodies, often connected to direct *personal* benefits. As a politician in Banjul explained,

You do know that there are many Gambians who benefitted from AU scholarships, from ECOWAS scholarships. And all these things are beneficial at a broader perspective. And I can also dearly say that, you know, the intervention in The Gambia, done by ECOWAS, in The Gambia here, I benefitted personally because it saved me from something (politician, focus group, former APRC members of parliament, April 16, 2022).

Research participants from less privileged backgrounds and rural parts of the country also referred to benefits, but often to more indirect, even diffuse impacts. As one respondent in Kanilai noted,

I personally I have not ever benefited from the ECOWAS but also and maybe there were some benefits that have come through the help of the government and which I am a part of because I am a citizen. Once there is benefit that has come through the government it might have filtered to me in one way or the other, but personally I have never benefited from it (elder, focus group, citizens, Kanilai, March 15, 2022).

The elder’s response not only reveals a largely positive evaluation of the AU and ECOWAS, but strikingly shows a more general, diffuse trust in the goodwill and ability of those in authority, even though its effect is difficult to describe in tangible ways. This clearly contrasts with the first narrative which reflects a more deep-seated suspicion regarding the willingness of those in charge to actually work for the benefit of both the people and the country as a whole. The three different narratives about the AU and ECOWAS thus already display a wide discrepancy in how Gambians speak about and evaluate the two organizations and the benefit the latter bring to their and the country’s lives.

## **5. PERCEPTIONS OF AU AND ECOWAS INTERVENTIONS**

When intervening in their member states, the AU and ECOWAS can be experienced not only by those in direct contact with the intervention, but by a much larger part of society as well. The following chapter presents local perceptions of AU and ECOWAS interventions in The Gambia since 2016. While the focus is on the immediate response to the electoral defeat of Yahya Jammeh in 2016 and the ensuing “impasse” in early 2017, we also discuss the continued presence of ECOMIG and its variegated perception by elite and everyday Gambians.

The chapter starts by revealing widely shared perceptions (5.1) that raise little to no controversy but are common throughout Gambian society. From there, two opposing narratives are described with regard to the interventions in 2016/17: “Siding with the People” (5.2) shows support for the AU and ECOWAS intervention. In contrast, the narrative of an “Occupying Force” (5.3) challenges the interventions fundamentally. The fourth narrative, “Everyday Peace Restored” (5.4), stands rather apart, as it tells the story of those whose voices often remain unheard. Regarding the continued presence of ECOMIG forces even today, two narratives compete for dominance (5.5). We explain the difference in perceptions along the parameters of space, time, and socio-economic and political positionality.

### **5.1 SHARED PERCEPTIONS**

This section describes the overall “mood” in The Gambia about the AU and ECOWAS interventions since 2016. There are three main perceptions that cut across different subsets of Gambian society and even unite otherwise divided societal camps.



First, the broad majority of research participants appreciate the contribution of the AU and ECOWAS to peace and security. Their arrival is associated with the departure of former President Yahya Jammeh from power. As a young market woman explained, the intervention prevented disastrous consequences:

I believe they did a very, very good job. They did something very, very extremely good. When you look at Banjul itself, the State House itself, it's very, very close to the hospital. God forbids, if something happens, it would be a disaster. So, I believe they did something noble at that time (young woman, focus group, market women, GBA, November 13, 2021).

The owner of a small business in Banjul added:

They promote peace in the country. Like, what happened here in 2016, when the former president said he is not going to step down, these are people who came together as one body to talk and negotiate and promote peace within the country and that is a very important thing, you understand? (Owner of a small business, focus group, informal sector, GBA, March 6, 2022).

This general appreciation underlines the recognition of the AU and ECOWAS' principles of non-indifference, and the appreciation of the decision to consider the Gambian case of regional importance and eventually to intervene. However, and this is the second shared perception, research participants expressed a genuine feeling of being overwhelmed and left in the dark when it came to understanding the context of the interventions. Describing the initial intervention as "high-level" and exclusive, research participants saw themselves as passive recipients of the interventions:

I think, it was preventive diplomacy at the top level. The people, us, we were not part of it. Whatever was done, was done at the higher level (member of TANGO, focus group, civil society, GBA, November 1, 2021).

As the diplomatic negotiations did not formally include civil society or the wider public, it was only press statements by Halifa Sallah, spokesperson of Coalition 2016, and informal personal networks (family, friends, Facebook, WhatsApp, radio) that kept some flow of *gis-gis*<sup>8</sup> alive. With regard to the ECOMIG intervention, participants found that they knew little about the details of the mandate since the rules of engagement and mission statement, for example, have never been made available to the public.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Wolof word for opinions and news distributed via informal channels.

9 Except in a press statement given by ECOMIG Commander General François Ndiaye on 01/31/2017 (Williams 2017).

Third, the role of The Gambia's neighbor Senegal is widely contested and runs like a thread through all focus groups and interviews. A long and tricky history between the two countries has caused suspicion about the Senegalese government having political interests in supporting the change of power in The Gambia. The deployment of ECOMIG fueled this fear: Not only has the Senegalese contingent outnumbered contingents from Ghana and Nigeria, it has actually been stationed in the region of Foni, which is Jammeh's home base. Foni is also less than 10 km away from the border to Casamance, a Senegalese region claimed by the separatist armed *Mouvement des forces démocratiques de la Casamance* (MFDC). The Senegalese contingent is not perceived as being part of ECOMIG but generally referred to as “the Senegalese” – even though they wear ECOWAS emblems on their uniform:

Now, you go to Foni, you don't find ECOMIG. You find these Senegalese soldiers, trying to protect the border and their timber and other stuff which is also impacting negatively this country (politician and former APRC deputy, focus group, former APRC members of parliament, GBA, April 16, 2022).

A community elder in Kanilai further explained the ECOMIG deployment and how he perceived it as a security threat:

So, this is something that we could not understand and having the ECOMIG Senegalese forces stationed in Kanilai which is just meters away from the south Senegal border that is Casamance, where you have the separatist movement who are fighting with the Senegalese government. And you have the ECOMIG forces who are Senegalese stationed in proximity. That is close to them, is in itself a security threat to us, because they are two warring sides and they could clash at the slightest mistake (elder, focus group, citizens, Kanilai, March 25, 2022).

A politician from Foni expressed his concerns with a focus on the Senegalese contingent of ECOMIG protecting the State House:

But our State House today is manned by the Senegalese, you know, key areas within the Fonis are manned by the Senegalese. The presidential motorcade is manned by the Senegalese. So, the English side is thrown away, since a French occupant is coming to The Gambia (politician, focus group, citizens, Kanilai, March 25, 2022).

The fact that the contingent is regarded as “the Senegalese” rather than belonging to ECOMIG not only indicates a lack of information and knowledge about the intervention itself; at the same time, it

fuels rejection and resistance against ECOMIG forces in The Gambia generally and in the region of Foni particularly (see 5.3 and 5.4).<sup>10</sup>

Together, the three shared perceptions paint a picture of a generally appreciated but non-inclusive and distant – albeit geographically very close – intervention that is contested due to some of its particular features. In the following sections, we will discuss competing narratives about both the initial phase and the enduring ECOMIG presence, which show that beyond these shared perceptions, Gambians hold starkly diverging readings of the legitimacy, necessity, and outcomes of the AU and ECOWAS interventions since 2016/17.

## 5.2 “SIDING WITH THE PEOPLE... BUT...”

For one group of our research participants, the AU and ECOWAS interventions in The Gambia initially were timely, necessary, and effective. The early phase of both the non-military and military components of the intervention in late 2016 and early 2017 enjoyed broad support among Gambians because the AU and ECOWAS were seen as “siding with the people and not siding with Jammeh” (journalist, interview, February 24, 2022) and “to enforce the verdict of the people” (deputy of the former opposition, focus group with former opposition members of parliament, GBA, November 5, 2021). However, in our conversations, this assessment also came with a “but”: Over the years, the continued presence of ECOMIG was seen as equally problematic, with ECOWAS regarded as overstaying their mandate (see also 5.4).

In the Gambian case, the intervention was characterized as a “carrot and stick” tactic. Decision-making was limited to the political level, which was geared exclusively towards ensuring a peaceful transition of power: “In my opinion, their main aim was to remove Yahya Jammeh and restore peace for me” (student, focus group, rural youth, Fass Njaga Choi, March 13, 2022). Supporters of this narrative believe that the AU and ECOWAS interventions helped subvert potential violence or pending war as a result of Jammeh’s refusal to leave:

There was push and pull and every junction was packed with sandbags and at Westfield some said they will fight and others say they will not kill their family, because we are one and peace was going on. So, some of us, when we saw ECOWAS coming in, were dancing, we thought there was going to be a war and some people were crying because of their business and stuffs (youth, focus group, informal sector, GBA, March 6, 2022).

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<sup>10</sup> Part of the debate around the Senegalese ECOMIG contingent is a bilateral security agreement between Senegal and The Gambia that has been referenced by both governments to justify operations outside the ECOMIG mandate, for instance against illegal trade in timber (Witt/Schnabel 2020). Yet, for Gambians this caused confusion: “Because also at some point we have seen this ECOMIG soldiers, taking timbers to Senegal so I don’t know if they are part of the ECOMIG or Senegalese soldiers. So, I think we should be told if we have another agreement with Senegal” (member of Think Young Women, focus group, urban youth, GBA, November 3, 2021).

Even one politician from Yahya Jammeh’s party APRC noted during the focus group:

If Gambia had not been a member of ECOWAS or AU in 2016 it would have been very CATASTROPHIC in The Gambia. I, personally, would say that due to the intervention of ECOWAS and AU, it means, that was a blessing in disguise for the Gambians (former APRC deputy, focus group, former APRC members of parliament, GBA, April 16, 2022).

This shows that the narrative enjoys broad support, even beyond the majority of Gambians who voted Jammeh out of office. Even former members of Jammeh’s cabinet and members of the APRC who walked away from Jammeh state that it was time for Jammeh to leave power—and hence legitimate to enforce it.

When it comes to the first phase of shuttle diplomacy by (former) heads of state, most of the respondents recalled some of the dignitaries who came and largely agree that such a high-level approach to diplomacy was needed, even though it was not inclusive. Another respondent noted that “the political parties were the only people called to consult. However, the level of consultations with the CSOs have not had that engagement,” (youth activist, focus group, civil society, GBA, November 1, 2021), except, as he added, for TANGO, The Association of Non-Governmental Organizations in The Gambia.

The support for the early phase of the intervention is largely connected to three aspects of the intervention: First, the intervention was seen as very timely and necessary. Many of the youth and civil society actors in rural and urban areas believe that Jammeh would not have left without the intervention, and that without ECOWAS, Jammeh would still be here. As one young program officer noted, Jammeh “was trying to create a chaotic situation” (program officer, focus group, urban youth, GBA, November 3, 2021). Second, the initial intervention was peaceful and did not cause harm to Gambian citizens. As a religious leader stated:

I think anything has a positive and negative side, or advantages and disadvantages but I believe that the majority of Gambians definitely were so happy for the interventions and definitely they rebreathed, they were excited when ECOWAS succeeded in their mission. [...] but for the entire Gambia definitely, the whole Gambia should consider the intervention good and there was no harm to any citizens of The Gambia (imam, interview, GBA, November 5, 2021).

Third, the intervention rekindled the hope of the youth and citizens in the trajectory of the country. As one participant emphasized, it was through the intervention that the “citizens began to believe that our Gambia is moving on the right track” (youth activist, focus group, urban youth, GBA, November 3, 2021).

### **The Use of Force Was Legitimate**

Although through ECOMIG the military has become the most visible aspect of the ECOWAS intervention over time, it did not come in until after the diplomatic negotiations came to an end. Yet, the threat to use force if Jammeh did not leave was on the table much earlier and was widely supported by Gambians.

Although the AU and ECOWAS had already threatened the use of force in their formal communications just a few days after Jammeh's U-turn (see 3.2), this threat had been neither translated nor made accessible to the wider Gambian public. This made the impression that there was no plan and that everything was done in the heat of the moment. As a journalist noted, "there was no clear road map" and "the arrangement was not cleared, it was done in a haphazard way" (journalist, focus group, civil society, GBA, November 1, 2021). Despite this alleged lack of adequate preparation, the result yielded by the use of force was welcomed:

I can remember, ehm, that moment really when people were coming. I mean these ECOWAS soldiers all of a sudden became celebrities [laughs]. Yeah, people were coming, jumping and you know some were bringing food in Banjul, giving to them. Some were giving them tea, you know, [...] all of the people were coming, praying for them like seriously. You know those things were happening there at the time. It was really, it was really quite emotional (journalist, interview, GBA, February 25, 2022).

While generally in support of the military component of the intervention, when asked whether they expected the intervention to take place, some respondents were more surprised than others. Some said they expected the use of force as "the only language Jammeh understands":

I know they were dealing with somebody very strong-headed and it was only the gun that would kick him out after he rejected the results. After the rejection of the results due process was not even his interest. [...] So, what he did was, because I knew very well, that this man [will not] leave any time soon and he will need forces to come to our aid (program officer, focus group, urban youth, GBA, November 3, 2021).

An activist agreed:

I think, the use of force was necessary, because of the type of person we were dealing with [...] the use of force was kinda touching to some Gambians [...] I think the kind of force that was used was necessary for them to threaten Jammeh to accept the cause (activist, focus group, civil society, GBA, November 1, 2021).

For others, military intervention came as a surprise as a nurse from Fass Njaga Choi explained:

Actually, we were not expecting it, we never lived like this, so we never expected we will reach a point that foreign forces will come and help us in the country. For me, personally, I was not expecting another person to interfere to remove him, no (nurse, focus group, rural youth, Fass Njaga Choi, March 13, 2022).

This narrative also points to a nuanced view about the ownership of change. While it acknowledges the fact that it was the national struggle leading up to the 2016 elections, the Gambian electorate coming together ahead of the elections to unite behind the Coalition 2016, and a strong vote that forced Jammeh out of power, it equally acknowledges the role of the AU and ECOWAS in ensuring that “the verdict of the people” materialized:

And when the ECOMIG soldiers came, they first allay the fear of the people and that there will be no war and that’s the reason we are even sitting here to talk about it. If they allowed it to be war, we couldn’t have been here. So, because of them yes, we the citizens have voted, but the ECOMIG came to maintain peace (youth activist and student, focus group, urban youth, GBA, November 3, 2021).

This first narrative displays how there was a broad consensus among Gambians who appreciated the early intervention of the AU and ECOWAS in late 2016 and early 2017 for being timely, necessary, and robust enough but without harming civilians, as well as for eventually ensuring the transition of power. However, as the research data shows, the narrative of “Siding with the People” sees itself confronted with a political and temporal caveat. While for the former ruling party APRC and its supporters, the interference of the AU and ECOWAS is fundamentally contested (5.3), the fact that the intervention continued to be present in The Gambia became a bone of contention among most Gambians (5.5).

### **5.3 THE AU AND ECOWAS AS AN “OCCUPYING FORCE”**

In contrast to the generally appreciative narrative introduced above, one can find a narrative fundamentally criticizing the AU and ECOWAS interventions. This strand of local critique essentially questions (1) the overall necessity and legitimacy of the regional intervention in response to Jammeh’s reluctance to leave office, thereby calling into question any foreign interference. It is (2) the mode and conduct of the intervention, particularly the parameters of the diplomatic negotiations and the use of force that this narrative takes issue with. It extends to calling into question the overall enactment of the intervention, accusing the AU and ECOWAS of siding with the former opposition and the coalition candidate Adama Barrow, leaving no room for maneuver to former President Yahya Jammeh.

As a comparison of the focus group data shows, this narrative is most prominent in the region of Foni which is not only the deployment site of the Senegalese ECOMIG contingent but also the home of Yahya Jammeh and the ethnic group of Jolas. During Jammeh’s reign, the Jolas were privileged with access to economic resources and power which they were at risk of losing upon the defeat of

Jammeh. After his defeat, with a drop in government funding directed to the region and a president who is allegedly neglecting the region, one can observe a feeling of marginalization (interviews in Kampanti, March 30, 2022). However, the narrative is also dominant among still loyal parts of the former governing party APRC and its supporters.

The first subject of critique concerns the overall necessity and legitimacy of intervention. Accordingly, the AU and ECOWAS intervention was seen as neither necessary nor legitimate; instead, the intervention as well as the threat and eventual use of force in the form of ECOMIG was seen as an occupying force. This conveys two notions: One, the narrative implies that Yahya Jammeh would have left even without the interventions because he initially conceded defeat. Tied to that is the popular move to not blame Yahya Jammeh for the “impasse,” but instead the IEC for announcing a corrected set of election results, which allegedly resulted in Jammeh losing faith in the IEC. It is argued that only from this moment on did he decide to change his mind and to refuse to accept the election results. Identifying the IEC as the scapegoat and taking the blame from Jammeh declares the intervention against Jammeh as null and void. Two, another facet of the occupation narrative is the sovereignty argument which challenges the basic assumption of the “impasse.” Critics argue that there was no “impasse” as the constitution allowed for a transition of power until January 19, 2017. Although Jammeh lost the election on December 1, 2016, according to the constitution, his term was supposed to end on January 19, 2017 (Republic of The Gambia 1997). According to this line of argumentation, the AU and ECOWAS had no reason to exert pressure on Jammeh to leave before that date. The storyline proceeds in arguing that Jammeh had every right to make a case at the Supreme Court to investigate the two sets of election results published by the IEC. However, the fact that he had sacked all the Supreme Court judges before lodging a protest made this endeavor a dead end.

The second subject of fundamental critique regards the mode of intervention. As there were no longer any Supreme Court judges in place to intervene, those heavily criticizing the AU and ECOWAS interventions would have preferred that the organizations send judges. The diplomatic negotiations that took place instead are perceived as a pre-written game enforcing an already defined result, as a civil society member explained APRC’s fierce criticism:

So, what was ECOWAS doing? What was ECOWAS doing, what kind of level of negotiation was it? Was it a documented negotiation, I mean, was it? (Youth activist, focus group, civil society, GBA, November 1, 2021).

For example, critique posits that the future of Yahya Jammeh was already decided. Instead of having multiple options at hand, Jammeh was urged to leave. Not only having to resign from power but being forced to leave the country added onto the already existing resentment against regional envoys. This links to another point of contestation, namely the supposedly brokered agreement between the AU, ECOWAS, UNOWAS, the then opposition parties and Yahya Jammeh, which continues to spark debate until today. Following the narrative of oppression, concerned voices stated that this agreement initially allowed Jammeh to return but was broken by the regional organizations and the current government. As the current government stipulates that the agreement was brokered exclusively between



the regional organizations and Yahya Jammeh but not the incoming government, the agreement and its (potential) role remain contested. This contestation of the diplomatic consultations as such reveals a perceived winner-loser dynamic, in which the AU and ECOWAS, in the eyes of critics, took a partisan stance for the incoming President Adama Barrow and behaved treacherously toward their long-time partner Yahya Jammeh.

As for the military intervention, it is depicted by this narrative as unnecessary because Yahya Jammeh had already acquiesced to step down in a late-night agreement. According to this narrative, The Gambia was not a country on the brink of war; as an interview partner put it, “not a single chicken was killed” (interview with a political ally of Yahya Jammeh, GBA, March 23, 2022) during the transition of power, making a military intervention an exaggerated response. As a result, the ECOMIG deployment is seen as an occupation, or as an APRC politician put it in exemplary fashion: “[T]hey came straight to Foni and they occupied all areas within that region” (politician, focus group, citizens, Kanilai, March 25, 2022).

This second narrative of the AU and ECOWAS as an “Occupying Force” describes how parts of the former ruling party APRC and Jammeh supporters, particularly in the region of Foni, oppose the AU and ECOWAS interventions, as they consider them to have been illegitimate and unnecessary. However, this narrative is employed by only a minority of our research participants. In contrast, the first narrative of “Siding with the People” showed that the majority of Gambians felt relieved when Yahya Jammeh finally relinquished power after days of the AU and ECOWAS engaging in shuttle diplomacy and exerting the threat and eventual use of force. Juxtaposing the two narratives reveals the two dominant (politicized) stories of how Gambians experienced the immediate post-election crisis in late 2016 and early 2017 in The Gambia.

#### 5.4 EVERYDAY PEACE RESTORED

At a clear remove from the rather politicized narratives of “Siding with the People” and “Occupying Force,” this section tells the story referred to by those Gambians who are disconnected from the political discourse and usually not involved in the nitty-gritties of interventions. This narrative instead puts forward the notion of and wish for a peaceful everyday life after times of uncertainty and fear. The AU and ECOWAS interventions are depicted as a vehicle that initially caused fright but ultimately brought back “business as usual.”

The group that employs this narrative is characterized by the fact that their voices often remain unheard. No matter their political standpoints, they employ neither pro-Jammeh nor pro-Barrow rhetoric and appear not to care too much about who is running the country. These are predominantly research participants (1) from suburban marginalized communities with little or no linkage to the political sphere, or (2) from rural areas distant from the intervention sites and government politics.<sup>11</sup>

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11 Some elites also appropriate this narrative and speak for those marginalized, concerned about the everyday security of Gambian citizens that allows them to go about their business.

Everyday Gambians who have no or little access to the political discourse due to their level of formal education, their socio-economic situation, or other aspects of their positionality tend to support the interventions, lauding them for normalizing everyday life.

Peaceful everyday life is the core interest of this group. The balance of going to work, attending school, selling products at the market, and visiting family was upset during the “impasse.” Asked to stay at home and exposed to only limited information, many Gambians were instilled with fear as their daily lives were put on hold. With the looming intervention, research participants reported that they did not know what to expect from the intervention and, eventually, that “everyone was scared” (youth activist, focus group, urban youth, GBA, November 3, 2021). A staff member of the YMCA agreed:

It’s a little bit scary when you hear their [AU and ECOWAS] names. [...] When I told my mum [...] what came to her mind was that the war will begin by tomorrow. [...] Some people don’t know it, so it’s scary to them (YMCA, focus group, civil society, GBA, November 1, 2021).

Similarly, a market woman mentioned that Gambians started to flee their homes as they were scared:

Initially, people were so scared when they heard that the ECOWAS military are on the way coming to The Gambia. It put fear in people, many people were afraid and decided to flee the country in numbers (market vendor, focus group, market women, GBA, November 13, 2021).

As the AU and ECOWAS started the consultations and threatened with a military intervention, insecurity about what would happen next resulted in fear, even the fear of an outbreak of war. However, this does not necessarily mean that those Gambians were not supportive of the change in power. In fact, this narrative demonstrates how everyday Gambians were concerned first of all with their own lives and, consequently, did not focus so much on the political level but were rather afraid that the intervention could turn into violence.

Yet, once the military intervention began and Yahya Jammeh left The Gambia, the skepticism gave way to relief and the realization that the intervention had brought back everyday life, as a community elder in Wassu extolled: “Ever since they came here, it’s been peaceful” (elder, focus group, elders, Wassu, March 12, 2022). A representative from Actionaid agreed: “I think, they did everything possible to ensure that he would leave and there was no bloodshed and normalcy returns” (Actionaid representative, interview, GBA, November 15, 2021). In a similar vein, a TANGO representative contributed:

We have the ECOMIG on the ground here, maintaining peace and making sure that Gambians engage in their economic activities under peaceful conditions. I think, this is important (TANGO representative, focus group, civil society, GBA, November 1, 2021).

Although life under Yahya Jammeh was not always peaceful, the very fact that Gambians held the perception that their daily routines were at some point under severe threat and that it was the AU and ECOWAS who made this normalcy return stresses the importance of “the everyday” in intervention contexts, as a YMCA staff member contributed:

Now, even my mummy, if I tell her ECOWAS, she is very confident that nothing will happen. ECOWAS is only here to make sure that we have peace. They will not come and fight you because you have nothing to do with them. This is about politicians and they have to sort it out [loud noise] (YMCA, focus group, civil society, GBA, November 1, 2021).

### **5.5 ENDURING INTERVENTION: “DANGER OF A COUP” VS. “OVERSTAYING” „OPPRESSORS”**

The following section focuses on the later stage of the intervention when ECOMIG stayed in the country after the so-called “impasse.” For this period, the AU was less visible and perceptions concentrate instead on ECOMIG. For that, we identified two competing narratives that, seven years into the intervention, find themselves in a process of still being negotiated. First, the “Danger of a Coup” is used to justify the continued extensions of the ECOMIG mandate. Second, the continued presence of ECOMIG is seen as overstaying their mandate, with more radical voices even calling ECOMIG “oppressors.”

#### **“Danger of a Coup” Upon ECOMIG’s Departure**

The perceived danger of a looming coup d’état in The Gambia is strongly reflected in the research data. It is widely believed that former President Jammeh still has remnants of loyalists in The Gambian Armed Forces. The story goes that these loyalists may rise to overthrow Barrow’s government in the absence of ECOMIG. Thus, the fear that once ECOMIG leaves The Gambia, a security void will be created which the disgruntled elements of the security forces will fill. This serves as justification for the continued presence of ECOMIG forces in The Gambia with the objective of stabilizing the country and averting a military coup.<sup>12</sup> This narrative is generally used by rural and urban elites that support the current government under Adama Barrow and who saw the arrival of ECOMIG as a means to create stability.

Three reasons why the current government opts for a continued presence of ECOMIG are referred to: First, doubts about the current state of the Gambian security forces in the light of potentially remaining Jammeh loyalists and a delayed (or even abandoned) reform of the security sector build the key argument for an extension of the ECOMIG mandate (interview with former state intelligence, March 10, 2022). Accordingly, the ECOMIG presence should last at least until the security sector reform process is successfully completed. Second, the flaring tensions in the neighboring region

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12 In December 2022, plans for a coup attempt in The Gambia became public. After several allegations and arrests, the courts dropped charges against most of the suspects.

of Casamance between the Senegalese Army and the MFDC lend credibility to the assumption that instability in the border region will flare up again when ECOMIG withdraws. Third, with reference to the resurgence of coups d'état in West Africa, not only allies of current President Adama Barrow but also intelligence personnel argue in favor of a continued ECOMIG presence. A Gambian lawyer summarized:

Watching what happens in Mali, Guinea, people were like “oh God it can happen again.” [...] So, for me there is a sense of fear and I think it is a general or common feeling that once these people [ECOMIG] leave anything is possible in the army again (Female Lawyers Association, interview, November 18, 2021).

This narrative is less widespread and is nourished by a diffuse fear rather than any concrete threat. It mostly reflects the reasoning of government elites and their supporters. In contrast, there is a competing, far more widespread narrative that instead depicts ECOMIG as “overstaying” their mandate, and in a more radical tone, as “oppressors.”

#### **“Overstaying” “Oppressors”**

In contrast to the narrative of the “Danger of a Coup,” which argues for a continued presence of ECOMIG, the following narrative of the “Overstaying” “Oppressors” would prefer an immediate withdrawal by ECOWAS troops from Gambian territory. This narrative is characterized by a rather moderate (“overstay”) and a more far-reaching radical critique (“oppressors”).

#### *“Overstay”*

The “overstay” critique is in fact an extension of the first narrative that sees ECOWAS as “Siding with the People.” Although a large majority of Gambians welcomed the ECOWAS intervention, there is a growing feeling that they have stayed too long. In 2021, Afrobarometer data showed that eight of every ten Gambians wanted ECOMIG to leave and for The Gambia defense and security forces to take charge of the country’s security, which amounts to a 28% increase since 2018 (Afrobarometer 2018 and 2021). As our findings show, this narrative is employed by (1) most of the military voices we spoke to, (2) those who supported Coalition 2016 and were initially in favor of the intervention but now feel growing dissatisfaction with ECOMIG, and (3) those who were former Jammeh supporters but switched sides to the current President Adama Barrow.

With several extensions, the initially celebrated ECOMIG is now seen as force that has overstayed its welcome and is perceived to be contributing to insecurity, particularly in the Foni region. A young female student in Kanifing indicated that ECOWAS had “overstay[ed] their welcome” (young female student, focus group, youth, GBA, November 3, 2021). Another young activist said:

They were ready to fight, ready to fight for the interest of the people but now that, you know, their main focus is the president and his executive [...] (youth activist, focus group, civil society, GBA, November 1, 2021).

For many research participants, the view that ECOMIG has overstayed its mandate has evoked a feeling of being sidelined and marginalized. In the politicized version of this narrative, the Gambian military is depicted as being sidelined even though the Gambian military could perform the same tasks:

We still have the ECOWAS forces in the country even though the majority wants them to leave, because they [the majority] feel like they didn't have anything to do here now and they are creating like more harm than good and doing stuff they are not supposed to do. So, that should be looked at. Because I think, on that part, it is not well done and if you look at it, I think, their mandate was supposed to be two years, I stand to be corrected, I think their mandate should be two years before it was extended, right? [...] I don't think this ECOWAS soldiers are doing things that our Gambian soldiers can't do right now. And the majority of Gambians really want them to leave now. ECOWAS can do something about it (member of Gambia Participates, focus group, urban youth, GBA, November 3, 2021).

The perceived relegation of Gambian security forces, it is argued, has implications for future stability in The Gambia, as a well-established member of civil society hinted:

The longer these missions take, the more you alienate your own soldiers and if you alienate them it's only a matter of time and it takes that time to burst the bubble and we will say God forbid (Caritas representative, focus group, civil society, GBA, November 3, 2021).

However, ECOWAS is not extending its stay of its own accord. Indeed, the organization's continuous presence in The Gambia is at the request of President Barrow and his government. However, in 2021 and early 2022, at the time of this research, only few of the respondents were able to make this connection and blame Barrow for the extension – rather than ECOWAS.

#### *ECOMIG as “Oppressors”*

While 78% of Gambians want ECOMIG to leave (Afrobarometer 2021), making this a widely held opinion, a more radical note is present as well. This can also be referred to as the “everyday” version of the “overstay” narrative rooted in the lived-through experience of those who feel marginalized, sidelined, and oppressed. In contrast to similar but more moderate voices across the country, this narrative is geographically bound and most pertinent in the province of Foni – which is not only where the Senegalese contingent of ECOMIG is stationed today but also the home region of former President Yahya Jammeh (for the consequences, see chapter 5.3).

The disapproval of the intervention from the outset has, over time, grown into a feeling of oppression. This is fueled by incidents around the interveners' presence, such as car accidents involving ECOWAS vehicles and soldiers, and even alleged sexual exploitation and abuse by ECOMIG troops (focus groups in Bwiam, March 10, 2021; in Kanilai, March 25, 2021; in Wassu, March 12, 2021). These stories shape the perceptions Gambians hold vis-à-vis ECOMIG and thus apply to ECOWAS more generally.

This feeling of oppression is tied to a perceived increase in instability and the view that ECOMIG forces are not only oppressors but also a security threat and risk in themselves, endangering rather than guarding the peace, as a community elder in Kanilai stated:

But they [ECOMIG] cause threats all over the country, especially [to] us, here, as a people, our freedom was seized, our right as a people. We were silent and dormant and heavy guns were put into our faces pointing to us, they were even ready to kill us because of one man was ruling the country who is part of us. As I am speaking to you, I am Gambian but what has happened in The Gambia and what is going on in The Gambia up to date, security is not here (elder, focus group, citizens, Kanilai, March 25, 2022).

A politician from Kanilai complained about the singular focus of ECOMIG on the region of Foni:

The government will use their game that, yes, ECOWAS is here for us, ECOWAS is here for everybody. But in Mankamang Kunda, ECOWAS is not there. In Banjul, they are not there. They are only stationed in one site. So, the intimidations are all in Foni. [...] And again, also economically they had hampered us: We saw a great loss, our lands seized. We cannot farm anymore and, again, the instability within the border region was caused by them (elder, focus group, citizens, Kanilai, March 25, 2022).

The criticism of oppression is voiced mostly in connection with the Senegalese contingent of ECOMIG stationed in the region of Foni. It points to limitations in everyday life caused by the ECOMIG presence. As the elder states, the seizure of land and limited possibilities to continue farming are but a few examples of this. A key trigger event was when a protest in front of the ECOMIG camp resulted in Harouna Jatta, a citizen from Kanilai, being shot by ECOMIG forces.

Even though the allegations are usually framed against "the Senegalese," when asked whether replacing the Senegalese contingent would make their situation any better, the research participants' answer was mostly no, and they emphasized the need for ECOMIG to leave entirely. Even more so, the initial active involvement of ECOMIG officers in fighting back the MFDC rebels crossing into Gambian territory from neighboring Casamance in early 2022 further inflamed tensions, seriously calling into question the overall performance of the intervention, as summarized by a community elder in Kanilai:

I don't know at the government level, but at our own local level, there is no significant whatsoever activities. They are doing here peacekeeping missions. So, definitely we see them as oppressors (elder, focus group, citizens, Kanilai, March 25, 2022).

Similarly, a party executive questioned ECOMIG's continued presence in The Gambia:

Now there is stability. We see no reason why they should continue occupying the country, because by now they should have a time frame and start handing over to the security [forces] of The Gambia, the country's security [forces]. But this is not happening despite they are here. But we are seeing soldiers from Senegal chasing Gambians up to the Gambian border, shooting them and taking them to Senegal. What is their use then? If they are here to protect Gambians why didn't they take steps against those things? So, all this is frustrating us and they are here, just impregnating our daughters [and] doing nothing, intimidating our people (interview with executive of political party, GBA, March 23, 2022).

ECOMIG's continued presence creates a feeling of oppression, particularly in the region of Foni. Together with a general feeling of being marginalized by the current presidency, this narrative is, on the one hand, used by everyday citizens who stress their dire situations and, on the other hand, by political forces still close to former President Yahya Jammeh who even toy with the threat of a coup d'état should the morale of the Gambian security forces be further undermined. In sum, this narrative of “Overstaying” “Oppressors” conveys an outright rejection of the continued ECOWAS intervention with all its components. Although this narrative is not shared by the majority of Gambians in its entirety and radicality, it bears explosive potential resulting from Gambians' experiences with regional interventions.

In summary, while the AU and ECOWAS interventions in The Gambia were received with quite divergent assessments from the outset, as the presence of ECOMIG has continued, perceptions of ECOWAS have deteriorated, leaving a large part of Gambian society skeptical today about the continued presence and benefit of ECOMIG.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

While the APSA is being activated ever more frequently to manage conflicts on the continent, the existing literature tends to look at such intervention contexts from a top-down or institutionalist perspective. This is why we still know little about how societies actually experience African regional interventions. This is the point of departure for this report which focuses on two key questions: (1) What perceptions do Gambians of different social, political, and economic backgrounds hold about the AU/ECOWAS interventions and the two organizations more generally?; and (2) What explains these different perceptions?

In a methodologically systematic approach, we closely examined local perceptions of the AU and ECOWAS and their interventions in The Gambia since 2016. In the present report, we show that Gambians' perceptions are ambiguous and provide nuances to the dominant success story of the AU and ECOWAS interventions in The Gambia: On the one hand, the interventions are clearly appreciated, in particular, the prompt and principled reactions by the AU and ECOWAS including the use of force. This, in fact, is in line with the evaluative yardsticks put forward in the literature. However, our research revealed a widespread narrative among everyday Gambians that is equally appreciative but for quite different reasons, which has hitherto not been adequately reflected in the literature. On the other hand, the interventions sparked more contestation and resistance than often assumed. Particularly the supporters of Yahya Jammeh considered the intervention unnecessary and illegitimate and hence saw the AU and ECOWAS as occupying forces. Over time, the initially positive assessment changed with the enduring presence of ECOMIG forces, which are today seen by a majority as either "overstaying" if not "oppressing." In short, we find that the regional interventions in The Gambia evoke starkly diverging perceptions, both of the initial AU and ECOWAS intervention directly responding to the political "impasse" of 2016/17 and of the enduring ECOMIG presence.

We explain this divergence based on parameters of space, time, and socio-economic as well as political positionality. In doing so, we demonstrate that which phases of the interventions are assessed how, by whom, and where crucially matters for understanding the multiplicity of local perceptions.

First, for the parameter of time, there remains divergence not only on the temporal scope of the intervention as such, but also on the roles of the AU and ECOWAS in the three time frames, namely before, during, and after the "impasse." Early support for the intervention by the former opposition and everyday Gambians contrasts with the more critical stance of the governing elite under Jammeh. The later phase of the military intervention, however, is increasingly more contested, particularly by everyday Gambians. At the same time, the now governing elite in both urban and rural areas continues to emphasize the need to extend the ECOMIG mandate. While the former government and opposition elites adhere consistently to their perceptions of the interventions, for everyday citizens the continued presence of ECOMIG over time has caused the proliferation of negative perceptions of the interventions, both in quantity and quality.

Second, the parameter of space, meaning the direct or indirect exposure and level of proximity to the diplomatic negotiators in the early phase and to ECOMIG in a later phase, crucially shaped citizens' perceptions: Those political elites closer to the diplomatic negotiations gained a deeper understanding of the proceedings, and were hence able to assess them against an informed baseline. As the negotiations were held on a high political level and were neither transparent nor inclusive for broader civil society or the public, with the flow of information restricted to few rather general press statements, the majority of Gambians were de facto detached from the process, no matter how emotionally invested they were. This changed when the threat and use of force became public and visible beyond the capital, with jet fighters in the sky and TV footage of ECOMIG at the borders. Arriving in Banjul, ECOMIG was welcomed and broadly appreciated by both elites and everyday citizens across the country. Yet, in the longer run – and here is where the parameters of time and space



intersect – direct exposure to ECOMIG personnel in the Foni region and concerns about a conflict overspill from neighboring Casamance negatively impacted citizens’ perceptions in Foni. As our findings show, proximity to Casamance, the role of Senegal, and the associated issues of sovereignty and political history clearly emerged in this spatial dimension but have so far been ill-managed. This demonstrates how the parameter of space requires close examination, especially when plans for deployment are being forged.

Third, this report shows that the research participants’ socio-economic and political positional-ity conditions how they experienced and eventually perceived the AU and ECOWAS interventions. Everyday citizens and marginalized groups in urban or rural areas with less access to the political discourse tended to employ the narrative of “Everyday Peace Restored” (5.4), while those elites with socio-economic means, access to and roles in the socio-political sphere were more involved in and more proximate (parameter of space) to the interventions. In terms of political positionality, the narrative of the AU and ECOWAS “Siding with the People” (5.2) pertained to the former opposition, while Jammeh’s supporters tended to adhere to the narrative of occupation and oppression (5.3 and 5.5). While these parameters allow the perceptions of intervention to be analyzed systematically, they are not mutually exclusive but interact at times.

What, then, do these results mean for current Gambian politics and the future of AU and ECOWAS interventions?

Since the intervention in 2016 and after an initial period of relief, tensions in the country have been growing, both socio-economically and politically, particularly around ECOMIG. Beginning with rumors and singular critiques, the escalation in Casamance and active involvement of ECOMIG (albeit only briefly) provoked more criticism. Afterwards, single members of parliament took up the grievances from Foni; then, in 2022, a whole group. The security forces respond defensively when asked about their relations to ECOMIG and express their wish for ECOMIG to leave. Since our field research for this report, the discourse has developed further: Nowadays, ECOMIG’s presence is increasingly linked with President Barrow, who is blamed for ECOMIG staying longer. Connecting this with increasing criticism directed at President Barrow, his lack of communication, and the above formulated perception of marginalization and neglect in Foni, this is worrisome for the country’s peace and security. If a prolonged ECOMIG presence is deemed necessary, the mandate and time frame need to be communicated clearly and the region of Foni needs to be addressed directly, for example through a visit by the President.

More than six years after the “impasse” and the AU and ECOWAS responses thereto, key points of contestation in The Gambia remain. This holds true in particular with regard to (1) the role of Senegal, (2) the alleged agreement in 2017 and a potential return of Yahya Jammeh, (3) the overstaying of ECOMIG forces, and (4) the question of the ownership of change. Depending on the socio-political situatedness, Gambians have extremely different responses to these issues, which continue to be central to the development of a new national identity in the “New Gambia.” If these points of contestation are not managed intelligently by the Gambian government, they bear the potential to further polarize Gambian society.

The AU and ECOWAS interventions in The Gambia have been regarded as a success in multilateral conflict management and the use of “coercive diplomacy” (Ateku 2020; Williams 2017). This is also reflected locally, in a widespread general appreciation of the initial phase of the interventions. However, our report also showed that this is only one part of the story and that there is contestation and stark divergence to be found in the way Gambians think about both the past and the ongoing presence of the AU and ECOWAS. For the AU and ECOWAS, this report, therefore, provides a source of lessons learned for the future conduct of interventions.

First, ECOMIG’s longer term presence and its increasing contestation within Gambian society raise questions about the legitimacy of interventions over time and demonstrate the need to constantly invest in the communication and justification of intervention efforts – but also in listening. Despite a focus on high-level diplomatic engagements, we recommend investing a significant amount of time and personnel in such crisis contexts in order to meet and exchange with national stakeholder groups in both urban and rural areas. This should go beyond elites to target the wider public, for example, through multipliers (community and religious representatives). These channels can be used in both ways, for listening to needs and fears on the one hand, and for explaining the role of regional bodies on the other. Second, while ECOWAS is often at the center of discussions (and criticism), the AU is mentioned only in passing. Yet, as the two organizations are generally regarded as “one,” an enduring ECOMIG presence could risk the initial positive assessment of the AU’s involvement in the early phase of the intervention. Third, the strong controversy surrounding Senegal’s part in ECOMIG underlines the ambiguous role of neighbors in building peace, which should be more cautiously weighed when mandating and composing regional peace support missions. Fourth, as the research shows, ECOWAS’ neglect of The Gambia prior to 2016 has had consequences and suggests the need for more efforts to prevent post-election crises.

As the vignette in the introduction demonstrates, citizens’ questions like “Who did the AU and ECOWAS side with?” and “What did the AU and ECOWAS actually do here?” point to the need for more inclusive and people-centered organizations. As the policies for this are already in place, the credibility and trustworthiness of the AU and ECOWAS will depend on whether they can reach their citizens effectively and make them attractive offers. A change in strategy from representative permanent missions to more outreach and engaging walk-in offices could be a starting point for this.

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**“SIDING WITH THE PEOPLE” OR  
“OCCUPYING FORCE”?**  
LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN UNION  
AND ECOWAS INTERVENTIONS IN  
THE GAMBIA

How do African citizens experience and evaluate African regional interventions? This research report examines the case of The Gambia to assess local perceptions of the African Union and ECOWAS, particularly of their interventions in that country since 2016. It is the result of collaborative and empirically comprehensive research carried out across the country in 2021/2022. We demonstrate that perceptions of the interventions in The Gambia are complex and diverge starkly, at times even contradicting each other. We explain this complexity as resulting from spatial, temporal, and sociopolitical factors that affect how these African regional interventions are (differently) perceived.

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