

EUROPEAN UNION YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROJECT - TOURISM AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES



SUCCESS STORIES 2025



International
Trade
Centre



European Union Youth Empowerment Project - Tourism and Creative Industries



Funded by
the European Union



European Union Youth Empowerment Project - Tourism and Creative Industries, funded by the European Union, is a 5-year initiative that seeks to increase the competitiveness, inclusiveness and sustainability of the tourism sector in The Gambia. The project focuses on women and youth as the main target beneficiaries. The project is supporting the country to diversify source markets and attract more visitors year-round, including tourists with higher purchasing power. At the same time, the initiative is boosting The Gambia's offering of green and inclusive tourism services and improving value chain linkages.



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About the Funder

The European Union

The European Union is an economic and political union of 27 European countries. It is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. It acts globally to promote sustainable development of societies, environment and economies, so that everyone can benefit.



About the Implementing Partner

The International Trade Centre (ITC)

ITC is a joint agency of the World Trade Organization and the United Nations. ITC assists small and medium-sized enterprises in developing and transition economies to become more competitive.
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PERREH BI FEST

HOW PERREH BI FEST IS STRENGTHENING DOMESTIC TOURISM IN THE GAMBIA

For years, the beaches in The Gambia were simply a weekend spot for families and friends to relax, with few activities beyond casual leisure. That changed when the first-ever Perreh Bi Fest, funded by the European Union Youth Empowerment Project – Tourism and Creative Industries, transformed the beach into a scene of cultural parades, music, sports and entrepreneurship.

The festival featured live music, traditional wrestling, volleyball, art exhibitions and small businesses showcasing their products and services. It brought together families and visitors in a celebration of what Gambia offers.

For small businesses, the event offered a unique opportunity to showcase their products, gain exposure and generate income.

Vendors included juice pressers, fashion designers, craft makers and food producers, all contributing to a lively marketplace that combined culture and commerce.

“I am currently being trained in bakery and pastry through the EU YEP – Tourism and Creative Industries,” said Bernadette Jatta, one of the young entrepreneurs who exhibited at the festival. “This platform is helping me put my skills into practice and reach new customers.”

Ya Awa Nyassi, the Monitoring and Creative Industries Development Specialist at the International Trade Centre Gambia, noted that the event represents a shift in how Gambians engage with their coastline.

“The Perreh-Bi Fest will transform the coastline into a hub of cultural celebration and economic activity,” she said. “The festival aims to provide a significant boost to local businesses by offering a dedicated marketplace for vendors, from fruit sellers and juice pressers to craftspeople. It also seeks to celebrate The Gambia’s rich cultural heritage through curated performances while promoting environmental sustainability with eco-friendly practices at all events.”

Tourism is a key driver of The Gambia’s economy, contributing approximately 20% of GDP and providing jobs for nearly one in five Gambians.

The creative industries also hold significant potential for youth employment, with estimates suggesting up to 50,000 jobs by 2026. Perreh Bi Fest is strengthening domestic tourism while supporting small businesses.

The festival will continue monthly from November 2025 to January 2026. This will provide consistent platforms for artists and entrepreneurs to connect with visitors and grow the tourism and creative industries.



**TENDABA
CAMP, KIANG**



TENDABA CAMP OVERCOMES POWER CHALLENGES WITH SUSTAINABLE ENERGY

Built in 1972 along the River Gambia, Tendaba Camp in Kiang Central has long served as a hub for conferences, accommodation and river excursions. Its riverside location makes it a unique gateway for visitors to explore The Gambia's natural beauty. However, high cost of electricity was a constant challenge.

Although The Gambia is a land of rich culture, history and breathtaking natural beauty, many tourism and heritage sites including Tendaba Camp face everyday challenges like unreliable electricity. This can affect visitors' experiences and limit opportunities for business.

Through the EU-funded European Union Youth Empowerment Project – Tourism and

Creative Industries, these challenges are being addressed with practical, sustainable support that empowers tourist sites and strengthens local businesses. Key tourism and heritage sites have received critical infrastructure support.

As part of this initiative, Tendaba Camp received 16 solar panels, a battery and an inverter, providing a reliable and environmentally friendly power source.

“The camp used to face major challenges because the cost of purchasing cash power each month was very high,” Lamin explains. “Since receiving the solar, our reliance on cash power has decreased significantly.”

He adds, “The solar system is especially helpful when electricity goes off. Before, this would disrupt our operations, leading to guest complaints and even water shortages, as we also use electricity to pump water from the borehole. Now, the backup solar system ensures continuous service.”

The benefits extend beyond uninterrupted power. “During conferences or when tourists visit, we no longer rely solely on electricity, which helps reduce costs,” he says. “This improvement allows us to maintain high standards, provide reliable services and ultimately attract more visitors.”

This green support is helping Tendaba Camp enhance visitor experiences, improve operational efficiency and strengthen its position in The Gambia’s tourism industry.

Today, the camp stands as an example to how practical support and renewable solutions can empower local businesses while showcasing the country’s natural beauty to the world.



MARIAMA CHAM

GAMBIAN ARTIST MARIAMA CHAM SHINES AT YARAM FESTIVAL IN UK

With the support of the International Trade Centre through the European Union funded European Union Youth Empowerment Project – Tourism and Creative Industries, Gambian singer Mariama Cham made her debut performance at the Yaram Festival 2025 in the United Kingdom, marking a major milestone in her artistic journey.

The Yaram Festival celebrates the rich heritage of Senegambia and West Africa. It brings people together through music, dance, masquerades, storytelling, art, crafts and food. Cham was selected through a competitive process that sought to spotlight emerging female talent in The Gambia's creative industries. Her participation in the festival gave her a unique opportunity to gain international exposure, grow her career and connect with people from around the world.

Beyond her own growth, Cham represented Gambian culture on the world stage and showed the richness of the country's heritage and creativity. She became an ambassador for Destination Gambia, reaching a diverse audience and inspiring interest in the country as a place full of art, culture and life.

"This was my first time performing on such a grand stage," Cham shared. "At first, I felt uneasy, but once I started singing and saw the crowd's reaction, I was amazed. People loved my songs. After my performance, I received invitations from some of the most prominent platforms in the UK. It felt unreal. A young girl from The Gambia performed in the UK and made a mark that she would definitely be remembered by", Cham said smiling.

The Yaram Festival, known for celebrating African and Caribbean culture, proved to be a launchpad for Cham's career. She went on to perform at the Africa Centre—one of the UK's leading platforms for African music—and at SteamDown, a renowned hub for musical maestros. Her growing recognition also led to an exclusive interview with the BBC's "This is Africa" programme.

Reflecting on her experience, Cham emphasized the importance of international exposure for young creatives. "This trip was monumental. I am proud not just to have performed on those stages, but to carry and sell destination Gambia to the world," she said.

Cham also highlighted the potential of such opportunities for Gambian youth. "The Gambia has so much talent and potential. What we need is support. I am grateful to the EU for this opportunity and I hope more initiatives like this can help other young Gambians showcase their talents globally."



MOSES SONKO

FROM SMALL BEGINNINGS TO HOTEL

PARTNERSHIPS

The story of Smiling Coast Agro Processing is one of vision, resilience and belief in what Gambians can build for themselves. It did not begin with machinery or a factory, it began with a conversation. Moses Sonko still remembers the words that shaped his life's work. His late father, Malamin O. Sonko, looked at him and said: "If you want to make a real impact, build something that creates value here."

Those words became the foundation of the company he leads today.

At a time when almost all cashew left The Gambia raw, Moses saw a gap but also an opportunity. "Cashew was the obvious choice," he shared. "It is one of our strongest crops, yet local processing was almost non-existent. I saw an opportunity to support farmers, create jobs for women and youth and keep more value in The Gambia."

Smiling Coast Agro Processing was born from that ambition, to prove that world-class products can be made here at home.

The road ahead, however, was far from smooth. Building capacity from scratch meant navigating seasonal supply inconsistencies, quality control barriers and meeting export and certification standards.

"Sourcing consistent, high-quality raw cashew nuts was difficult," he explained. The supply chain was fragmented, staffing technically skilled workers was tough and achieving compliance required time, patience and investment. But every setback fueled determination. In Moses' words, "Those early hurdles helped shape a more resilient and sustainable company that continues to grow on a solid foundation."

Support from the International Trade Centre, through the EU-funded European Union Youth Empowerment Project – Tourism and Creative Industries, made a difference. Moses was supported to participate at regional and international trade events such as the Africa Food Systems Forum in Dakar and the China International Import. “These events increased our visibility,” Moses said. “. Through these expos, we have secured purchasing contracts, built relationships with international buyers and connected with key industry players, including hotels and distributors. They opened doors to new sales and partnerships and helped position us as a credible, competitive exporter.”

The momentum continued at home. The project together with ROOTS and FAO, organised a Gambian Agri-Food Small Businesses and Producers B2B Matchmaking event to strengthen local sourcing for the tourism sector. Moses was one of the participants. This event him connected the company directly with the tourism sector, opening new doors in the domestic market. “The B2B created real business for us, it did not end in conversations.

It turned into orders,” Moses shared. As a direct result, Smiling Coast Agro Processing secured a supply agreement with Bakadaji Hotel and entered negotiations with Ocean Bay Hotel, Djeliba Leisure Group, Africa Princess Hotel and Metzy Residence Hotel. These engagements have strengthened local market presence and created ongoing commercial interest in Gambian-produced cashew paste and kernels.

For the future, Moses is focused on scale, increasing production, enhancing processing quality and building capacity across the value chain. With HACCP certification already secured and BRC certification underway, he believes the future belongs to Gambian processors.



**GAMBIA
CULTURAL GROUP**

KEEPING CULTURE ALIVE WHILE CREATING JOBS

Cultural groups play a crucial role in promoting and preserving cultural heritage. They tell our stories, compose our songs and perform our masquerades and dances. Yet many face huge challenges. Most are not formalised, many lack financial literacy to manage their income and they often do not have the knowledge or skills to promote their events with proper visibility materials.

Gambia Cultural Group, a Zimba group, is no exception.

Founded by Badou Ndow over 20 years ago and now led by Batch Sowe, the group performs at different events across The Gambia. It is made up of 24 members. The Zimba masquerade comes from the Wolof people and embodies the spirit of the lion, strength, courage and leadership.

Passed down by ancestors, it comes alive with fierce drumming, unique costumes and playful street performances. The cultural group is one of those supported under the European Union Youth Empowerment Project – Tourism and Creative Industries, where their capacity was strengthened in stage presence and performance, marketing and business formalisation.

Reacting to the impact of the training, Batch said his group benefitted greatly from the knowledge gained.

“I found many things interesting, but the financial literacy session stood out the most,” he said. “We learned how to manage our finances properly, open accounts and separate personal expenses from business expenses.”

Batch added that the training also improved their ability to develop promotional and visibility materials for events, including adding contact information for bookings.

“We also realised the power of media through the training. Now we have promotional materials such as flyers, which have improved our visibility. We have received calls from clients who told us they heard about us through these materials.”

After the training, ITC through the EU YEP – Tourism and Creative Industries provided the group the opportunity to perform at

the European Union Youth Empowerment Project - Tourism and Creative Industries-funded pavilions at the Trade Fair and later during Cultural Night. Batch shared that these events further boosted their visibility and networking.

“We got bookings from those events. Recently, we were hired by Flex Fuzion Dance Academy to perform at Perreh Bi Fest, and GCCI also booked us for the Food Festival.”

Since then, the group has seen a sharp rise in bookings and visibility. They are now performing at tourist sites and public events and their presence continues to grow.



IDA ASHLEY CHAM

RISING WITH CONFIDENCE, ONE STAGE AT A TIME

Ida Ashley Cham is one of the young emerging artists making her way slowly but steadily in the Gambian music scene. Her path, however, has not been without its difficulties. As she explained, "As a woman in the Gambian music industry, there is limited access to opportunities and resources." Ida also shared that in the early stages of her career, she struggled to be taken seriously. "I was not taken seriously by my management team at the initial stage of my career," she recalled. Balancing family responsibilities with her music made it even harder. But despite everything, Ida kept going.

To support her growth, she received a training through the European Union Youth Empowerment Project – Tourism and Creative Industries. the emerging young artistes built her skills in music branding, composition, recording,

mixing, mastering, financial literacy and more. She describes the training as something that strengthened her confidence and helped her understand the business side of the industry better. "The training boosted my confidence, especially on the business side of music, protecting and projecting your image," she said.

During the sessions, Ida also learned practical performance skills that now help her on stage. She highlighted audience engagement as one of the most important lessons. "I am now able to perform under pressure and adapt to issues that may arise," she explained. She shared an example from Perreh Bi Fest: her dancers could not make it at the last minute, yet she did not panic. "I encouraged audience participation and turned the situation into a success," she said.

Performing at events like Perreh Bi Fest, a monthly beach event supported under the project, opened more doors for Ida.

It helped her gain visibility, build connections and grow more confident in handling live audiences. The experience later contributed to her performing at ECOFEST in Dakar, Senegal, an achievement she celebrates as an important step in her career.

For the future, Ida is planning to organise her own live concert sometime in 2026. Until then, she says she will continue performing as an invited or guest artist whenever she is called upon or booked.

Ida also has a message for younger artists, especially young women trying to enter the industry.

“If you choose music as a career, stay focused, dedicated and humble. Maintain your dignity, integrity and image. Try and learn another trade to help support your music career,” she advised.

With steady progress, courage and the right support, Ida Ashley Cham is building a name for herself, one performance at a time.



**BANNA
KONGIRA**

GREENER ENERGY, BETTER EXPERIENCES AT TALAMANCA LODGE

When Banna Kongira first arrived in Janjanbureh more than twenty years ago, he was a young man with a dream and little more than his entrepreneurial spirit. Janjanbureh, the historic town on the banks of the Gambia River, is known for its rich culture, colonial architecture and friendly communities, but back then, opportunities for small businesses were limited. Banna began modestly, running an art gallery where he sold crafts. Soon, he added a cooler box with cold drinks, responding to a simple need in the community.

As he observed the few restaurants in town, Banna saw an opportunity. He expanded into a food business. He opened a small restaurant that quickly became popular with locals and visitors

alike. By 2000, his vision had grown into something bigger with the opening of Talamanca Lodge. For Banna, the desire to create job opportunities for young people and providing accommodation to visitors inspired him to start the lodge.

Running the lodge, however, came with its challenges. Electricity was unreliable and expensive. "I used to spend a lot on electricity every month," Banna recalls. "It was eating into everything I earned." The constant stress of managing costs threatened his dream of creating a successful lodge.

Then came a turning point. Through the EU-funded European Union Youth Empowerment Project – Tourism and Creative Industries, Talamanca Lodge received solar panels. The difference was immediate.

Monthly electricity costs dropped from USD 30 to less than a dollar and the lodge could run sustainably and reliably.

For Banna, the change touched every part of his life. It gave him freedom, confidence and a renewed sense of hope. "Now I can focus on my guests and give them the best experience, instead of worrying about electricity bills," he says, smiling proudly.

Talamanca Lodge is now a story of vision and determination. Cutting costs, running sustainably and improving the guest experience have strengthened the lodge in ways Banna could only dream of before.

His work builds his business and also adds to the growing story of tourism in The Gambia.

Banna is optimistic for the future. "I always dreamed of seeing Talamanca Lodge as the best and most comfortable place in Janjanbureh and across the Central River Region. I can see that I am closer to this dream and with support like European Union Youth Empowerment Project – Tourism and Creative Industries, I know I will excel even further," he says confidently.



**MARIAMA
CEESAY**

FROM ONLINE TO ONSTAGE: ATTENDING AN INTERNATIONAL TRADE FAIR IN THE GAMBIA FOR THE FIRST TIME

Participating in trade shows is crucial for the growth of small businesses. It provides them opportunities to sell, network and enhance their visibility. Yet, many entrepreneurs, especially in least developed countries, struggle to participate in trade fairs due to high costs. That was the case for Mariama S. Ceesay, founder of Her Sacred Veil, a bespoke fashion brand in The Gambia.

“I had never participated in a trade show before because I did not have the financial means to cover the cost of a stall,” says Mariama. “As a small business owner, most of my resources focus on production and fulfilling customer orders.”

This changed when the European Union Youth Empowerment Project – Tourism

and Creative Industries, funded by the European Union and implemented by the International Trade Centre (ITC), stepped in. The project covered 90% of her stall fee, provided training and visibility products.

“I received training, help with my branding and an e-business card. Additionally, the project organized engaging activities around our stalls to attract more visitors and increase visibility for our businesses,” Mariama says said.

Before the fair, Her Sacred Veil operated mostly online. “I was mainly selling my products online through TikTok and WhatsApp. I used TikTok to showcase my products and reach a wider audience, while WhatsApp helped me

manage orders and communicate directly with customers. Now at the trade fair, I was able to show the quality, creativity and craftsmanship that go into every outfit I design," explains Mariama. The experience was a breakthrough.

Mariama made several sales and gained a new customer base. "I was happy about the orders I received during and after the trade fair. I also made some useful business contacts that will hopefully lead to future opportunities," she says.

Mariama's highlight was connecting directly with new customers and hearing their positive feedback about her bespoke outfits. "It was exciting that people appreciated my designs and placed orders on the spot."

She did not hit her target in terms of sales, but for Mariama, the trade fair was much more than that. 'Sales were lower than expected, but I learned a lot, especially about converting interest into purchases.'

Now, the business owner is thinking bigger. She plans to attend more fairs and seek for support to acquire equipment and a showroom. "I'm currently working with one sewing machine. I dream of getting an overlock machine and creating a space that truly reflects my brand."



MARIE JOBE



FROM GARDEN TO HOTELS: HOW MARIE FOUND HER MARKET

In the quiet farming community of Njawara, Marie Jobe spends most of her mornings tending to her small plot at the Njawara Women's Community Garden. Since 2021, she has been growing tomatoes, green pepper, cauliflower and other vegetables, produce that supports both herself and her family. Like many women producers across rural Gambia, Marie worked hard but faced challenges that limited her income and growth.

Her biggest struggle was access to bigger and better markets. "We only depended on the local market," she recalled. "The prices there are not good for us. We always sell at a low price." Marie also lacked information on quality control, basic food safety and production planning, knowledge that would help her grow the right crops at the right time to meet demand.

Through the European Union Youth Empowerment Project – Tourism and Creative Industries, efforts are underway to connect small producers like Marie with hotels, restaurants and other businesses in the tourism sector. Marie was among the farmers trained in production calendars, market access and food safety. The training gave her a new perspective. "We learned basic food safety in production and quality control," she said. "I also learned the production cycle, when to plant so that you can sell at a good price."

Soon after, the project, in partnership with ROOTS and the Gambia Hotel Association, organized a Gambian Agri-Food Small Businesses and Producers B2B Matchmaking event to strengthen local sourcing for the tourism sector. For Marie, it was eye-opening.

“I never knew our products could be sold to hotels or restaurants,” she shared. “Before this session, I thought the only market we had was the local one. I had the opportunity to network with different hotels and restaurants, exchanged contacts and even exhibited my vegetables. It was a big moment for me.”

The event gave her the confidence to take her farming to another level. She now follows the production calendar she learned during the training and has already started planting with a clearer plan. “When I harvest, I will be able to supply hotels with my products,” she said proudly.

Marie also participated in the 2025 GCCI Trade Fair Gambia International, the largest trade event in The Gambia; thanks to the European Youth Empowerment Project - Tourism and Creative Industries. She described it as another turning point. She credited the fair for helping her make sales, improve her visibility and broaden her network.

With better knowledge, stronger links to businesses and new confidence, Marie is building a future where her hard work finally meets the right market and pays off.



JALIMA
TIYANA

TURNING PASSION INTO OPPORTUNITY

Bintou's Bakery and Catering started with a simple love for baking. For Jalima Tiyana, the founder, the kitchen was always a place of joy and creativity. She shared "Bintou's Bakery and Catering started from a simple passion for baking and sharing homemade food with loved ones. I have always enjoyed being in the kitchen and over time, friends and family encouraged me to turn my talent into a business,".

What began as small pastry orders from home gradually grew into a full catering and bakery service. Her goal has always been simple: to provide quality, delicious and affordable food made with love. "My inspiration comes from the joy baking brings to people. Food is a way to connect and spread happiness," Jalima explained.

Just like many small businesses, Jalima faced challenges. Limited resources, balancing time, marketing and building trust with customers were hurdles she had to overcome. "But with consistency, support and faith, I kept pushing forward," she said.

This year, Jalima participated in The Gambia Good Market for the first time. Organized by the Gambia Start-Up Chamber of Commerce and Gambia Women's Chamber of Commerce, with support from the EU-funded European Union Youth Empowerment Project – Tourism and Creative Industries implemented by ITC, the market is a platform where 100% Made in Gambia products are exhibited to locals and tourists. "I decided to participate to gain .

exposure, connect with potential customers and showcase my products to a wider audience. It was also a great opportunity to learn from others and grow both personally and professionally," she recalled. The experience brought immediate benefits. Sales increased, customer interest grew, and her brand gained visibility. "Since participating in the GGM, I have noticed positive changes in my business, more orders, more visibility and greater confidence," Jalima said. She also had the chance to network with other entrepreneurs, explore collaborations and learn valuable lessons for future growth.

Jalima has big plans for the future. She hopes to expand her product line, reach more customers through social media and markets, open a physical bakery, improve branding and packaging and even mentor young people interested in baking

"GGM is a great platform that gives you visibility, connections and real business growth. Believe in yourself, the journey begins with one step," she encouraged other young and women entrepreneurs.

From a kitchen hobby to a recognized bakery and catering business, Jalima's journey shows how passion, persistence and the right opportunities can turn dreams into reality.



BUILDING SKILLS, CREATING OPPORTUNITY

For many young people in The Gambia, access to practical skills can be the difference between waiting for work and creating it.

Through the European Union Youth Empowerment Project – Tourism and Creative Industries, young people and women are gaining hands-on skills that respond directly to the needs of the tourism and creative industries. In total, 294 youth and women are gaining in-demand skills opportunities under the project.

This includes 50 youth enrolled in tailoring and garment construction apprenticeships at the Bakoteh Production and Innovation Centre, Malick Mendy Tailoring and Ida's Idea, where learning happens on the job, under the guidance of experienced professionals.

It also includes 39 seasonal tourism workers who completed three months of training in bakery and pastry, hairdressing and makeup, enabling them to earn beyond the tourism season.

In hospitality, 85 youth and women are currently pursuing diplomas and certificates in professional cookery, room operations and small-scale food vending at The Gambia Tourism and Hospitality Institute, strengthening service quality and employability across the sector.

Furthermore, 120 youth are benefitting from SkYE Fund TVET scholarships in areas such as beauty and hairdressing, solar and electrical installation, arts and crafts and agricultural engineering. Over the life of the project, the SkYE Fund will support 2,800 youth with market-relevant skills.

Taken together, these interventions reflect one approach: empowering young Gambians with practical skills, real experience and pathways to income within the tourism and creative industries.