

Country profile

World Vision

Senegal

GEOGRAPHY

Senegal, a nation slightly smaller than Victoria, is located on the Atlantic coast of west Africa. In the south, a narrow strip of land bordering the Gambia River makes up the separate nation of Gambia.

Senegal generally consists of low rolling plains with savannah vegetation. The climate is semi-tropical (annual average temperature 29°C) with a long dry season and a short rainy season. The rainfall is very unreliable, leading to periodic drought.

PEOPLE

More than half of Senegal's 11.9 million people live in rural areas, but the urban centres are growing rapidly. The capital and major port is Dakar, with around 2.5 million inhabitants. The Wolof is the largest ethnic group, making up more than 40 percent of the population. Most people speak the Wolof language, but French is the official language due to the region's colonial past. The government has begun to encourage the use of local languages in literacy programs. About 94 percent of Senegalese are Muslims; the rest are Christians or animists. Muslim religious leaders called marabouts play a key social role.



Map courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

HISTORY

This region, inhabited since 13,000BC, was part of several important empires in west Africa, including the Djolof (Mali) empire from the 13th to the 16th century. The religion of Islam was introduced by invaders from the north sometime before 1000AD. The Portuguese first visited the coast in 1444-5 and developed a busy trade in slaves and minerals.

Nearly 200 years later, the French set up trading posts including St Louis, while the British became interested in the area along the Gambia River. In 1889, France recognised the British colony of Gambia, surrounded by French territory.

After the slave trade was abolished, the French encountered resistance by Islamic leaders. After World War 2, Senegal became an overseas territory of France. Following a brief federation with Mali, Senegal declared its independence in 1960. A confederation of Senegal with Gambia lasted only from 1981 to 1989.

Senegal takes pride in having a democratically elected civilian government, although opposition to authority has not always been tolerated. Internal conflict in the southern area called Casamance has been complicated by the involvement of rebels and arms from neighbouring countries.



World Vision's health activities in Senegal include raising awareness among children and families on how to prevent diseases such as malaria.

ECONOMY

Although agriculture is the main activity, Senegal has to import much of its cereal needs. Groundnuts (peanuts) are a dominant export crop, but intensive production has reduced soil fertility and the country's earnings are severely affected by falls in international groundnut prices.

In some places declining rainfall has led to a change from crop-growing to livestock-raising, while the damming of the Senegal River to provide irrigation water and electricity has benefited commercial farmers rather than peasant families who used to depend on annual river floods. Coastal fishing is another important source of revenue, but large-scale fishing by foreign trawlers is depleting the fish stocks.

Important income is earned from tourists who visit Senegal's beautiful beaches and from money sent home by Senegalese living abroad. However since the 2008 economic crisis this income has been jeopardised by a fall in employment opportunities in European countries and a fall in tourism. Many people, especially adult males, move to the city hoping to find work. Unfortunately, unemployment is a serious problem.

LIVING CONDITIONS

Rural Senegalese generally grow their own food (such as millet, cow peas or rice), and are therefore very vulnerable in times of drought. Fish is an important source of protein. Rice has become the preferred food for urban families, partly because it keeps well.

Common illnesses, such as diarrhoea, are linked to poor living conditions. Many rural families do not have access to clean water, because wells dry up in the low rainfall season and others yield water too salty to drink. Many children have been immunised to protect them from measles, tetanus and other killer diseases, but programs haven't reached everyone. Malaria remains a serious problem.



Providing families with solar lamps is one innovative approach that World Vision has used in Senegal to improve access to learning opportunities.

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	SENEGAL	AUSTRALIA
Population	12.9 million	21.5 million
Urban population	42.4%	89.1%
GNI per capita (US\$ PPP)	\$1,816	\$38,692
Population with sustainable access to an improved water source	69%	100%
Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above)	41.9%	99%
Population living on less than US\$1.25 (PPP) a day	33.5%	0%
Under-5 mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	108	6
Life expectancy at birth	56.2 years	81.9 years

Source: United Nations Development Programme
Human Development Report 2010

EDUCATION

Women and men have clearly defined roles. One result of this is that women have less access to education. The primary school enrolment of girls has risen slightly due to advocacy campaigns, but girls are still less likely to go to school than boys and far more likely to be illiterate. Very few children of either gender go on to secondary school. Many children are required to help at home or in the fields. Senegal faces the challenge of providing for a rapidly growing population from a limited resource base.

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN SENEGAL

- sponsored children, their families and communities are assisted to meet needs in areas including education (for girls and boys), healthcare and agricultural production;
- the construction of boreholes and pumps provides clean water for rural communities and local technicians are trained to maintain the pumps;
- women use small loans to start up family businesses such as extracting peanut oil.