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Compressed Transitions and Urbanisation without Industrialisation: Rethinking Demographic Theory through The Gambia, 1963–2024

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Abstract

This study interprets The Gambia's demographic trajectory (1963–2024) as a compressed transition in a microstate, where rapid mortality decline, lagging fertility, and spatial concentration generate distinctive pressures. Census data, UN estimates, and GIS analysis reveal an eightfold population increase and accelerated urbanisation, producing a primate city in the Greater Banjul Area and intensifying inequality and ecological vulnerability. Unlike classical transition models, The Gambia's path reflects external health interventions, cultural persistence, and microstate scale. Urbanisation has unfolded without industrialisation, yielding peri-urban sprawl and informal settlements disconnected from diversification. Governance mediates the population–resource nexus: weak institutions heighten ecological stress, while adaptive livelihoods emerge. By situating The Gambia within comparative West African contexts, the paper advances demographic theory by demonstrating how **compressed transitions, urbanisation without industrialisation, and governance mediation converge in microstates**, amplifying both risks and opportunities for sustainable development.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Demographic change has long been central to debates in human geography and development studies, not only because of its implications for population size and structure but also for the ways in which it reshapes spatial organization, resource use, and governance (Chandna, 2008; Hornby & Jones, 1993). In West Africa, demographic dynamics have been particularly pronounced since the mid-twentieth century, with rapid population growth, high fertility, declining mortality, and accelerating urbanisation transforming societies at an unprecedented pace.

The Gambia, a small riverine state bordered almost entirely by Senegal, offers a distinctive case study of these processes. Its demographic trajectory since independence in 1965 illustrates both the commonalities of the West African experience and the unique challenges of a microstate with limited land, fragile ecosystems, and a high dependence on cross-border flows. At independence, The Gambia's population was fewer than 400,000. By 2024, it had reached 2.4 million, representing an almost eightfold increase in just six decades. This growth has been driven by persistently high fertility, significant reductions in mortality, and the momentum of a youthful age structure (GBoS, 2020). The country's demographic profile is characterized by a median age of just 18.6 years, with more than 60 percent of the population under the age of 25 — placing The Gambia among the youngest populations globally, with profound implications for education, employment, migration, and political stability.

1.2 Gap in the Literature

Despite extensive scholarship on demographic and urban transitions in Africa, most studies focus on larger states with diversified urban systems and broader territorial capacity. The distinctive dynamics of microstates — where demographic change is compressed into small spatial scales and ecological

vulnerability is acute — remain underexplored. Existing analyses of The Gambia have documented rapid population growth and urbanisation, but they often present these trends descriptively, without situating them within recent theoretical debates on **compressed transitions**, **primate city dominance**, and the **population–resource nexus**.

1.3 Recent Advances

Recent scholarship has significantly advanced our understanding of demographic and urban processes in the Global South. Menashe-Oren and Bocquier (2021) highlight the heterogeneity of African demographic transitions, while Fox and Goodfellow (2022) and Randolph & Storper (2023) emphasise the political economy of urbanisation and spatial inequality. Bocquier et al. (2023) and Dorward et al. (2023) further illustrate how governance and institutional capacity mediate demographic pressures. Yet, these insights have rarely been applied to microstates like The Gambia, where spatial concentration magnifies both opportunities and vulnerabilities.

1.4 Contribution

This paper addresses that gap by reinterpreting The Gambia's demographic trajectory as a case of **compressed transition in a microstate**. It demonstrates how mortality decline, lagging fertility, and spatial concentration interact to reshape demographic pathways and magnify governance challenges. In doing so, the study advances demographic theory by highlighting the distinctive dynamics of small states, situating The Gambia within comparative West African contexts, and underscoring the policy implications for managing youth bulges, resource stress, and urban inequality.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Demographic Transition Theory

The demographic transition model (DTM) remains the most widely used framework for analysing population change, positing a sequential shift from high fertility and mortality to low fertility and mortality as societies modernise (Notestein, 1945; Dyson, 2010). Yet African demographic trajectories often diverge from this linear model. Caldwell's (1982) "wealth flows" theory emphasised the persistence of high fertility due to cultural norms and intergenerational transfers, while Bongaarts & Casterline (2013) highlighted the externally influenced nature of mortality decline. More recent work stresses heterogeneity and compression in African transitions, where mortality declines rapidly due to international health interventions but fertility decline lags (Menashe-Oren & Bocquier, 2021).

The Gambian case exemplifies this compressed transition. Mortality has fallen sharply since the 1960s, largely due to vaccination campaigns, malaria control, and maternal health programs, while fertility remains above four children per woman in 2024 (GBoS, 2025; Barrow et al., 2024). This divergence underscores the need to adapt demographic transition theory to microstates, where limited land and ecological vulnerability magnify demographic pressure. The Gambia thus illustrates how compressed transitions unfold differently in small states compared to larger African countries.

2.2 Urban Transition and Mobility Models

Parallel to demographic transition is the urban transition, describing the shift from predominantly rural to predominantly urban societies (Davis, 1965; Montgomery et al., 2003). Zelinsky's (1971) "mobility transition" hypothesis links demographic change to intensified rural–urban migration. In sub-Saharan Africa, however, urbanisation has often been rapid but uneven, driven by natural increase and migration rather than sustained industrialisation (Potts, 2012).

Recent scholarship emphasises how African urbanisation is increasingly decoupled from industrial growth, producing distinctive forms of spatial inequality (Fox & Goodfellow, 2022; Randolph & Storper, 2023). The Gambian case reflects this divergence: in the 1960s, fewer than 20 percent of Gambians lived in urban areas, but by 2024 nearly 60 percent reside in towns and cities, with the Greater Banjul Area (GBA) emerging as a primate city region.

This expansion has generated peri-urban sprawl, informal settlements, and environmental stress, without corresponding industrial diversification. Such dynamics resonate with Schmid et al. (2017) and Sawyer et al. (2021), who argue that Global South urbanisation often produces new urban processes that deviate from modernist expectations of urbanisation coupled with industrialisation. The Gambia thus illustrates how microstate urban transitions intensify spatial concentration and inequality, challenging conventional models of urban growth.

2.3 Population–Resource Debates

The relationship between population growth and resource availability has long been debated, from Malthus's (1798) warnings of scarcity to Boserup's (1965) argument that population pressure can stimulate innovation. In African contexts, these debates have been reframed through political ecology, which emphasises governance, inequality, and external interventions as mediating factors (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987).

The Gambian case illustrates this complexity. Rapid population growth has intensified pressure on land and fisheries, leading to deforestation, soil degradation, and overfishing in the River Gambia estuary (Jaiteh & Sarr, 2011). Yet population pressure has also spurred horticultural intensification, women's cooperatives, and cross-border trade with Senegal. As Dorward et al. (2023) argue, resource scarcity is not simply a function of population growth but of governance and institutional capacity. In The Gambia, weak planning and fragile governance exacerbate ecological stress, suggesting that the challenge lies less in absolute scarcity than in the ability to manage abundance and scarcity alike.

2.4 Synthesis

Taken together, these perspectives provide a framework for analysing The Gambia's demographic shifts.

- **Demographic transition theory** highlights the compressed and externally influenced nature of fertility and mortality change.

- **Urban transition theory** underscores the decoupling of urbanisation from industrialisation and the dominance of primate city regions.
- **Population–resource debates** reveal how Malthusian stress and Boserupian adaptation coexist, mediated by governance capacity.

By situating The Gambia within these frameworks, this study extends demographic theory in three ways:

1. It demonstrates how compressed transitions are intensified in microstates.
2. It shows how urbanisation unfolds without industrialisation, producing new peri-urban forms and spatial inequalities.
3. It highlights how governance mediates the population–resource nexus more than absolute scarcity.

This synthesis underscores the need to move beyond universalist models and to recognise the specificities of small states, ecological vulnerability, and regional interdependence in shaping demographic trajectories.

3. Findings

3.1 Population Dynamics

Table 1 shows an eightfold increase from 315,486 in 1963 to 2.42 million in 2024, with growth rates peaking in the 1970s–1990s. Mortality decline was rapid, but fertility remained high, sustaining demographic pressure. Fertility decline has been slow and uneven, with cultural persistence and limited socioeconomic transformation sustaining high fertility rates. This lag produces sustained rapid growth despite mortality reductions.

Table 1
Population Growth in The Gambia (1963–2024)

Census Year	Population	Growth Rate (%)	Notes
1963	315,486	–	First modern census
1973	493,499	+ 4.6%	Mortality decline begins
1983	687,817	+ 3.4%	Fertility remains high
1993	1,038,145	+ 4.2%	Urbanisation accelerates
2003	1,360,681	+ 2.7%	Greater Banjul expansion
2013	1,882,450	+ 3.3%	Informal settlements intensify
2024 (est.)	2,422,712	+ 2.3%	Nearly eightfold increase

Source: Gambia Bureau of Statistics (Population and Housing Census, 1963–2013); United Nations World Population Prospects (2024 Revision).

3.2 Fertility and Mortality

Fertility has declined from approximately 6.5 children per woman in the 1970s to 4.2 in 2024. The decline is uneven: urban women and those with secondary education experience faster reductions, while rural fertility remains persistently high (GBoS & ICF, 2020).

Mortality fell rapidly from the 1960s onward, largely due to externally driven public health campaigns and donor supported interventions. This exogenous shock compressed the timeline of mortality decline, decoupling it from domestic economic transformation. Infant mortality declined from over 150 deaths per 1,000 live births in the 1960s to fewer than 40 in 2024, while life expectancy rose from 35 years to 62 years. Together, these shifts illustrate a partial but significant demographic transition: mortality decline is advanced, but fertility remains well above replacement.

Table 2
Fertility, Mortality, and Life Expectancy Trends

Decade	TFR (children/woman)	Infant Mortality (per 1,000)	Life Expectancy (years)
1960s	6.7	155	35
1980s	6.2	120	45
2000s	5.0	70	55
2020s	4.2	38	62

Source: Gambia Bureau of Statistics (Population and Housing Census, 1963–2013; Demographic and Health Surveys); United Nations World Population Prospects (2024 Revision); World Bank Open Data (2024).

3.3 Urbanisation and Spatial Distribution

The Gambia has experienced a profound urban transition. In the 1960s, less than one fifth of the population lived in towns; by 2024, nearly 60 percent resided in urban centres (GBoS, 2024). The Greater Banjul Area (GBA)—comprising Banjul, Kanifing, and the Kombo districts—has emerged as the country's primate city region, absorbing most of the urban growth (Jaiteh & Sarr, 2011). Urbanisation has unfolded without industrialisation. The Greater Banjul Area dominates spatially, but growth is driven by rural–urban migration and natural increase rather than manufacturing or services. The result is peri urban sprawl, informal settlements, and intensified spatial inequality.

Table 3
Urban vs. Rural Population Distribution (Selected Years)

Year	Urban Population (%)	Rural Population (%)	Key Spatial Notes
1963	~ 20%	~ 80%	Rural dominance
1983	~ 30%	~ 70%	Early urban concentration
1993	~ 40%	~ 60%	Greater Banjul primacy
2013	~ 50%	~ 50%	Peri-urban sprawl
2024	60%	40%	Urban majority, ecological stress

Source: Gambia Bureau of Statistics (Population and Housing Census, 1963–2013); United Nations World Population Prospects (2024 Revision).

Source: Prepared by the author

3.4 Age Structure and Youth Bulge

The Gambia's age structure is among the youngest globally. The median age is 18.6 years, and more than 60 percent of the population is under 25 (United Nations, 2022; World Bank, 2024). The dependency ratio remains high, with approximately 80 dependents per 100 working-age adults.

This youth bulge places significant pressure on education systems, labour markets, and social services. At the same time, it presents opportunities: if adequately educated and employed, this cohort could drive economic growth and innovation, contributing to a demographic dividend. Without sufficient investment, however, the risks of unemployment, underemployment, and migration pressures are considerable.

3.5 Comparative Regional Context

When compared with neighbouring states, The Gambia's demographic profile is broadly similar but more spatially constrained. Senegal, with a population exceeding 18 million, has a more diversified urban system and greater land resources. Guinea-Bissau, by contrast, shares The Gambia's small size and high fertility but has experienced slower urbanisation. Cape Verde illustrates a more advanced demographic transition, with fertility near replacement and stronger governance capacity.

Table 4 presents comparative demographic indicators for 2024, highlighting The Gambia's demographic intensity: high growth and urbanisation compressed into a small territorial space, magnifying the challenges of governance and resource management.

Table 4
Comparative Demographic Indicators (2024)

Country	Population (millions)	TFR	Median Age	Urban (%)	Growth Rate (%)
The Gambia	2.8	4.2	18.6	60	2.3
Senegal	18.0	4.3	19.2	52	2.5
Guinea-Bissau	2.1	4.6	18.0	45	2.4
Cape Verde	0.56	2.1	28.0	67	1.2

Source: Gambia Bureau of Statistics (GBoS, 2024 Census); United Nations World Population Prospects (2024 Revision); World Bank Open Data (2024).

Source: Prepared by the author

3.6 Summary of Findings

Four key patterns emerge:

1. **Sustained rapid growth**: Population has increased nearly eightfold since independence, with growth rates declining but still high.
2. **Partial demographic transition**: Mortality has declined sharply, fertility is falling but remains above replacement.
3. **Accelerating urbanisation**: The GBA dominates, producing spatial inequalities and peri-urban stress.
4. **Youth bulge**: A very young population presents both risks and opportunities, depending on policy responses.

Together, these findings situate The Gambia as a case of **compressed, externally influenced demographic transition**, with profound implications for urban planning, education, employment, and resource governance.

4. Discussion

The Gambian demographic trajectory is both emblematic of broader West African patterns and distinctive in its intensity and spatial concentration. Interpreting the findings through demographic transition theory, urban transition frameworks, and population–resource debates reveals how The Gambia exemplifies compressed transitions in microstates, where demographic change unfolds differently than in larger states.

4.1 Compressed Demographic Transition

The Gambia's demographic profile illustrates a partial and externally influenced transition. Mortality has declined sharply since the 1960s due to vaccination campaigns, malaria control, and maternal health

programs, while fertility remains high at 4.2 children per woman in 2024 (Barrow et al., 2024). This divergence from the classical European model underscores critiques by Caldwell (1982), Bongaarts & Casterline (2013), and Menashe-Oren & Bocquier (2021), who argue that African transitions are compressed and heterogeneous.

The persistence of high fertility despite improvements in education and urbanisation situates The Gambia in a Stage 2.5–3 position of the transition. This compressed trajectory—rapid mortality decline coupled with lagging fertility—produces sustained population pressure, magnified by the country's small territorial scale and ecological vulnerability.

4.2 Urbanisation without Industrialisation

The urban share of the population has risen from less than 20 percent in the 1960s to nearly 60 percent in 2024, concentrated in the Greater Banjul Area (GBA). While this aligns with Zelinsky's (1971) mobility transition hypothesis, The Gambia exemplifies the distinctive features of African urbanisation: growth driven by natural increase and migration rather than industrialisation (Potts, 2012; Fox & Goodfellow, 2022).

The GBA's expansion has produced peri-urban sprawl, informal settlements, and environmental stress, while rural areas face depopulation and service deficits. This reflects Randolph & Storper's (2023) argument that governance capacity shapes urban inequality. Moreover, The Gambia illustrates Schmid et al. (2017) and Sawyer et al. (2021)'s claim that Global South urbanisation often deviates from modernist expectations of urbanisation coupled with industrial growth. In microstates, spatial concentration intensifies these dynamics, producing a geography of inequality: a congested urban core juxtaposed with marginalised rural hinterlands.

4.3 Youth Bulge: Dividend or Burden

With over 60 percent of Gambians under 25, the youth bulge presents both risks and opportunities. In theory, this demographic moment could yield a dividend if investments in education, skills, and employment are sufficient (Bloom et al., 2003). Yet The Gambia's reliance on agriculture, fisheries, and remittances, coupled with limited industrial diversification, constrains this potential.

High youth unemployment and migration aspirations suggest the risk of a demographic burden, fuelling social discontent and irregular migration. This tension underscores the importance of governance interventions—expanding vocational training, job creation, and urban planning—to transform demographic pressure into economic opportunity.

4.4 Governance Mediation in the Population–Resource Nexus

Population growth has intensified pressure on land, fisheries, and infrastructure, consistent with Neo-Malthusian concerns. Yet Boserupian adaptation is also evident in horticultural intensification and cross-

border trade. The Gambian case supports Dorward et al. (2023)'s argument that resource scarcity is mediated by governance capacity rather than population growth alone.

Weak land tenure systems, limited fisheries management, and inadequate urban planning exacerbate ecological stress. Thus, the challenge is less one of absolute scarcity than of institutional capacity to manage abundance and scarcity alike. Governance mediation is therefore central to understanding The Gambia's population–resource nexus.

4.5 Comparative Regional Context

Comparisons with Senegal, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau highlight both commonalities and differences in demographic trajectories across West African microstates and small states. Like its neighbors, The Gambia experiences high fertility, declining mortality, and rapid urbanisation. Yet its small territorial size and ecological vulnerability magnify the intensity of these dynamics.

- **Senegal**: With a population of ~ 18 million, Senegal has a diversified urban system, including Dakar, Thiès, and Saint-Louis, which distribute demographic pressures more evenly. Fertility remains high (~ 4.0), but industrialisation and governance capacity are stronger than in The Gambia, moderating spatial inequality.
- **Cape Verde**: With ~ 0.56 million people, Cape Verde demonstrates a smoother demographic transition. Fertility has declined to ~ 2.1, close to replacement level, and governance capacity is relatively strong. Urbanisation (~ 67%) is accompanied by service sector growth, particularly tourism, which links urbanisation to economic diversification.
- **Guinea-Bissau**: With ~ 2.1 million people, Guinea-Bissau shares The Gambia's small size and high fertility (~ 4.6) but has experienced slower urbanisation (~ 45%). Mortality decline has been uneven, and governance capacity remains weak, with political instability constraining institutional adaptation.

Analytical Insights

- **Scale matters**: The Gambia's compressed transition is intensified by its microstate scale, where demographic change is concentrated in a small territorial space.
- **Urban systems differ**: Unlike Senegal's diversified urban system or Cape Verde's smoother transition, The Gambia remains dominated by a single primate city (Greater Banjul Area).
- **Governance capacity diverges**: Cape Verde's stronger institutions enable smoother adaptation, while Guinea-Bissau's chronic fragility mirrors The Gambia's governance challenges but with slower urbanisation and weaker institutional resilience.

This underscores the importance of scale and context in demographic analysis: microstates experience compressed transitions and intensified spatial inequality that cannot be reduced to generic African trajectories. The Gambian case thus contributes to comparative demographic scholarship by showing

how compressed transitions, primate city dominance, and governance mediation converge uniquely in microstates.

4.6 Synthesis

The Gambian case demonstrates the need to move beyond universalist models of demographic transition and adopt a context-sensitive approach. From a theoretical perspective, it illustrates:

- **Compressed transitions**: rapid mortality decline with lagging fertility, intensified by microstate scale.
- **Urbanisation without industrialisation**: primate city dominance and peri-urban sprawl decoupled from industrial growth.
- **Governance mediation**: ecological stress shaped less by absolute scarcity than by institutional capacity.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the urgency of investing in education, employment, and urban planning to harness the demographic dividend and mitigate risks of demographic burden. The Gambia thus serves as a critical case for rethinking demographic theory in microstates, where compressed transitions and spatial concentration amplify both opportunities and vulnerabilities.

Contribution to Theory

This study contributes to demographic scholarship by advancing the concept of compressed transitions in microstates, where rapid mortality decline and lagging fertility interact with spatial concentration to produce distinctive demographic pressures. The Gambian case demonstrates how urbanisation unfolds without industrialisation, generating primate city dominance, peri-urban sprawl, and intensified inequality in ways that diverge from modernist models of urban growth. It also highlights how governance mediates the population–resource nexus, showing that scarcity is less a demographic inevitability than a function of institutional capacity. By situating The Gambia within comparative West African contexts, the paper extends demographic theory beyond universalist models, underscoring the need for context-sensitive approaches that account for scale, ecological vulnerability, and governance in shaping demographic trajectories.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined demographic change in The Gambia from 1963 to 2024, situating the country's trajectory within broader debates on demographic transition, urbanisation, and the population–resource nexus. The findings reveal a profile marked by sustained rapid growth, partial fertility decline, sharp mortality reductions, accelerating urbanisation, and a pronounced youth bulge. Yet beyond description, the Gambian case offers a distinctive lens for rethinking demographic theory in microstates.

5.1 Theoretical Insights

From a theoretical perspective, The Gambia illustrates three critical insights:

- **Compressed transitions**: Mortality decline has been rapid and externally driven, while fertility decline remains slow and uneven. This compressed trajectory challenges the universality of classical demographic transition models and underscores the need to account for exogenous interventions and cultural persistence.
- **Urbanisation without industrialisation**: The concentration of growth in the Greater Banjul Area exemplifies primate city dominance, peri-urban sprawl, and informal settlement expansion in the absence of industrial diversification. This decoupling of urbanisation from economic transformation resonates with recent scholarship on Global South urban processes and highlights the intensified spatial inequalities of microstates.
- **Governance mediation of resource stress**: The coexistence of Malthusian pressures and Boserupian adaptations in land, fisheries, and livelihoods demonstrates that scarcity is not simply demographic but institutional. Weak governance and limited planning capacity exacerbate ecological vulnerability, making governance mediation central to understanding the population–resource nexus.

5.2 Policy Implications

The Gambia's youthful population presents both risk and opportunity: a potential demographic dividend contingent on investments in education, vocational training, and employment creation. Urban planning must address the challenges of primate city dominance, while rural development strategies are essential to mitigate regional disparities. Strengthened resource governance—particularly in land and fisheries—will be critical to sustainability in the face of demographic pressure and climate vulnerability.

Policy recommendations include:

- Strengthening urban planning and infrastructure in Greater Banjul.
- Enhancing governance capacity for land management and ecological resilience.
- Promoting economic diversification through small-scale manufacturing and services.
- Integrating demographic planning into climate adaptation strategies.

5.3 Comparative Perspective

In comparative perspective, The Gambia resonates with broader West African trends but is intensified by its small territorial size and ecological fragility. As such, it offers a critical case for rethinking demographic theory and policy in microstates, where compressed transitions and spatial concentration amplify both opportunities and vulnerabilities.

5.4 Future Research Directions

- Comparative microstate studies (e.g., Cape Verde, Mauritius).
- Longitudinal GIS analysis of peri-urban expansion and ecological vulnerability.

- Linking demographic transitions to climate change adaptation and migration studies.

5.5 Closing Statement

Ultimately, The Gambia's demographic future will be shaped not only by fertility and mortality trends but by the capacity of its institutions to manage urbanisation, harness the youth bulge, and govern resources sustainably. For scholars of demography and geography, the Gambian case underscores the need for **context-sensitive, interdisciplinary approaches** that move beyond linear models to capture the complex interplay of population, space, and governance in contemporary Africa.

By rethinking demographic theory through the Gambian case, this paper highlights the urgency of aligning **population dynamics, spatial planning, and governance reform** for sustainable development.

Declarations

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Ethics declaration: not applicable

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Figures

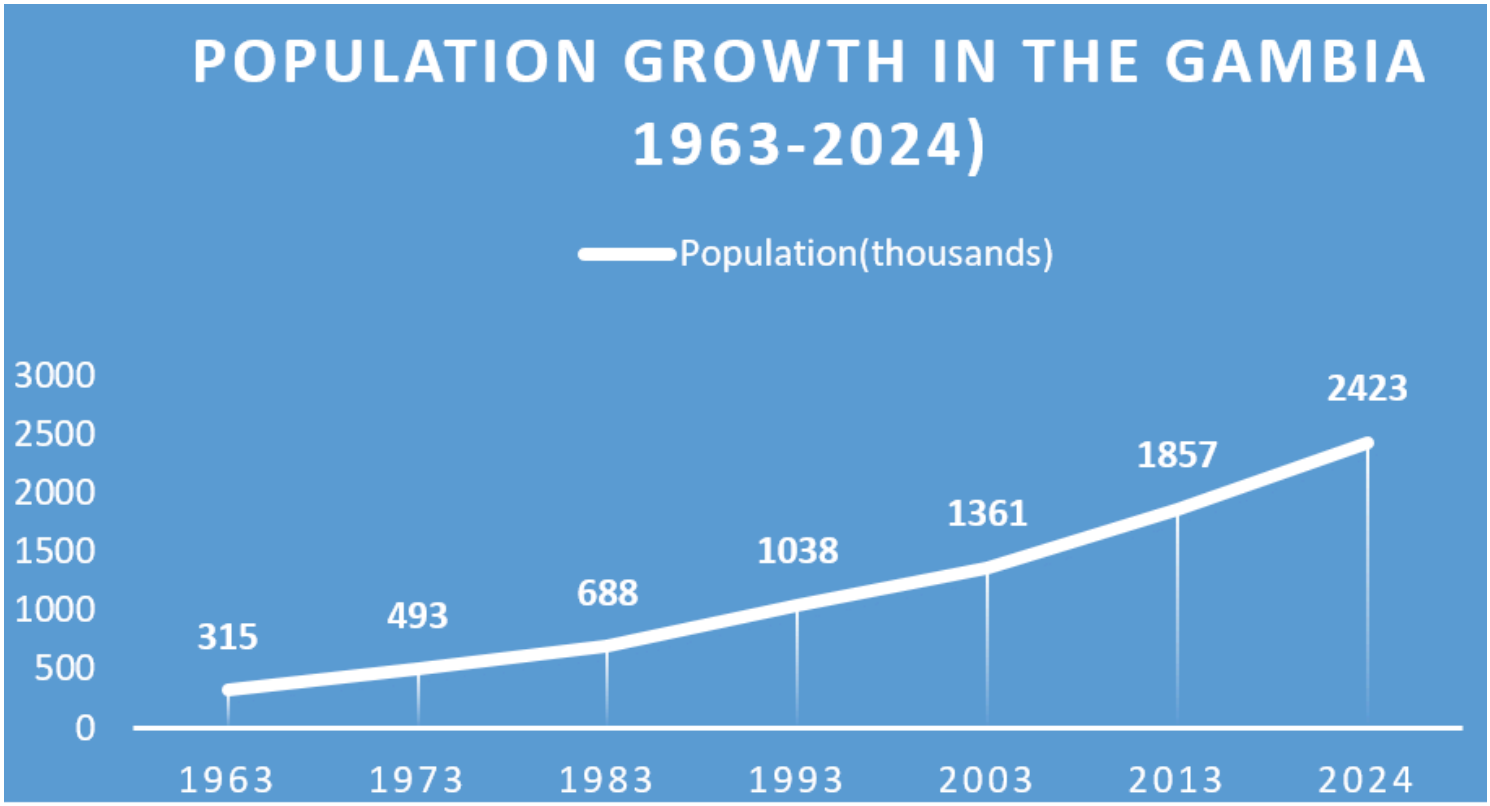


Figure 1

Population Growth in The Gambia, 1963–2024

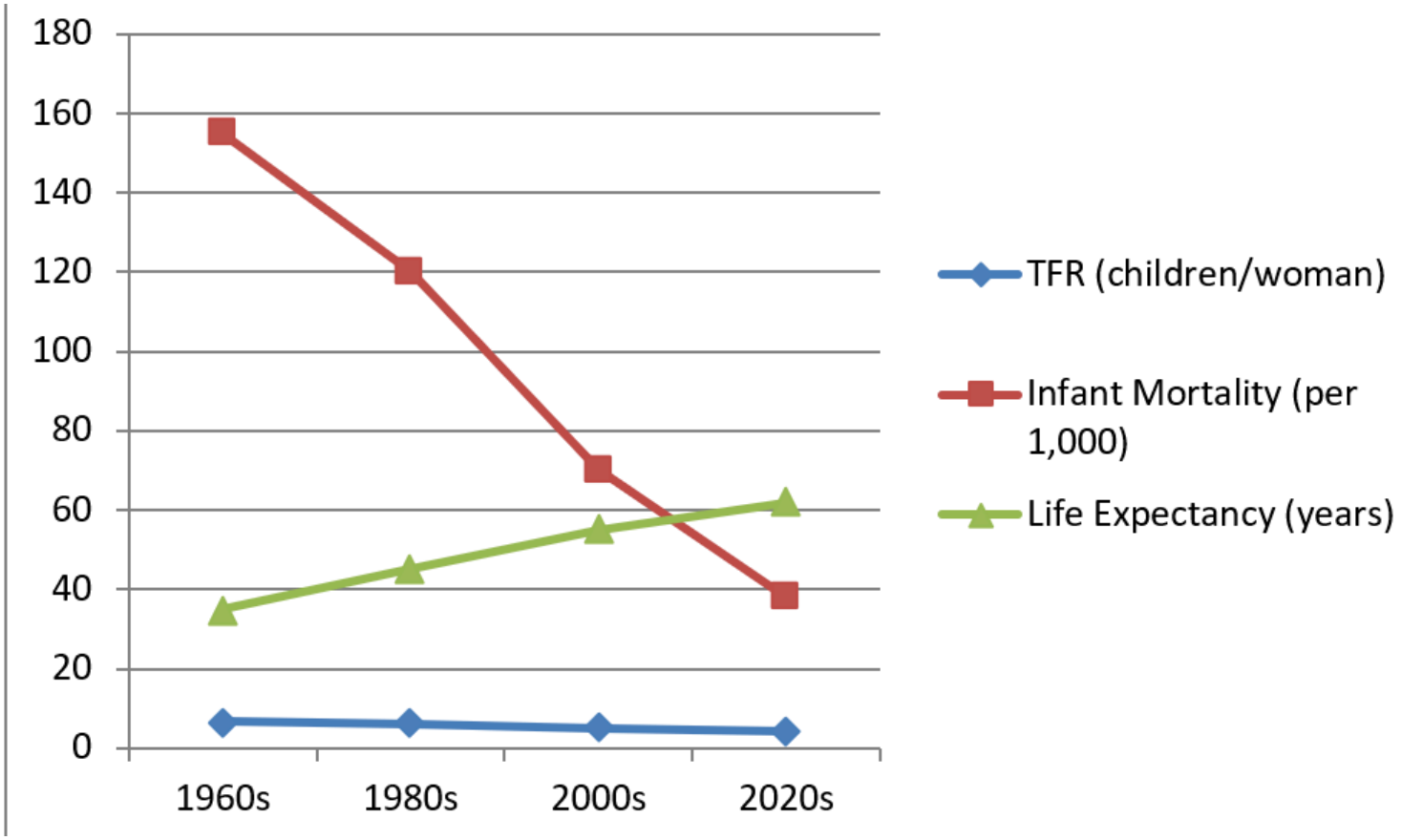


Figure 2

Fertility, Mortality, and Life Expectancy Trends

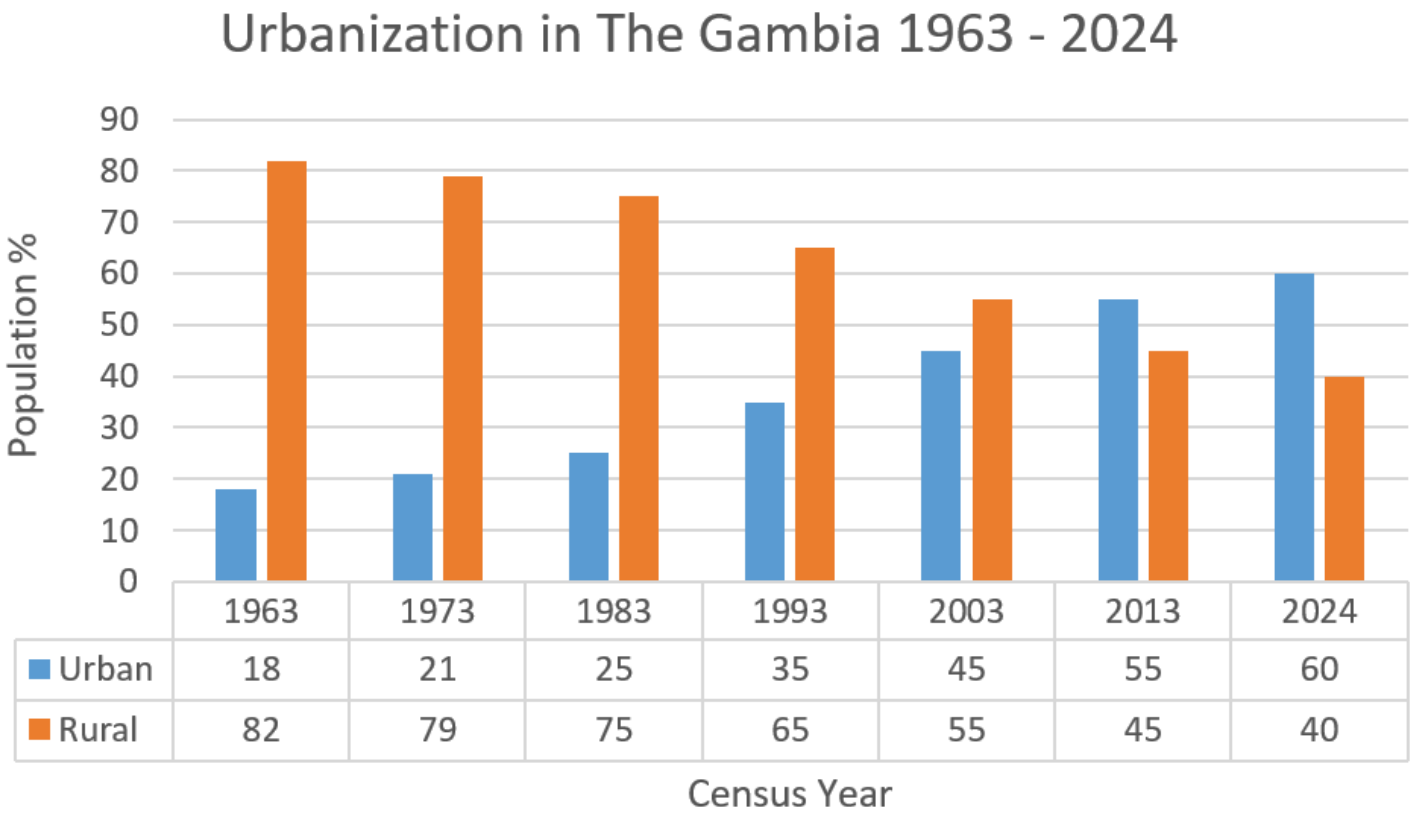


Figure 3

Urbanisation in The Gambia, 1963–2024

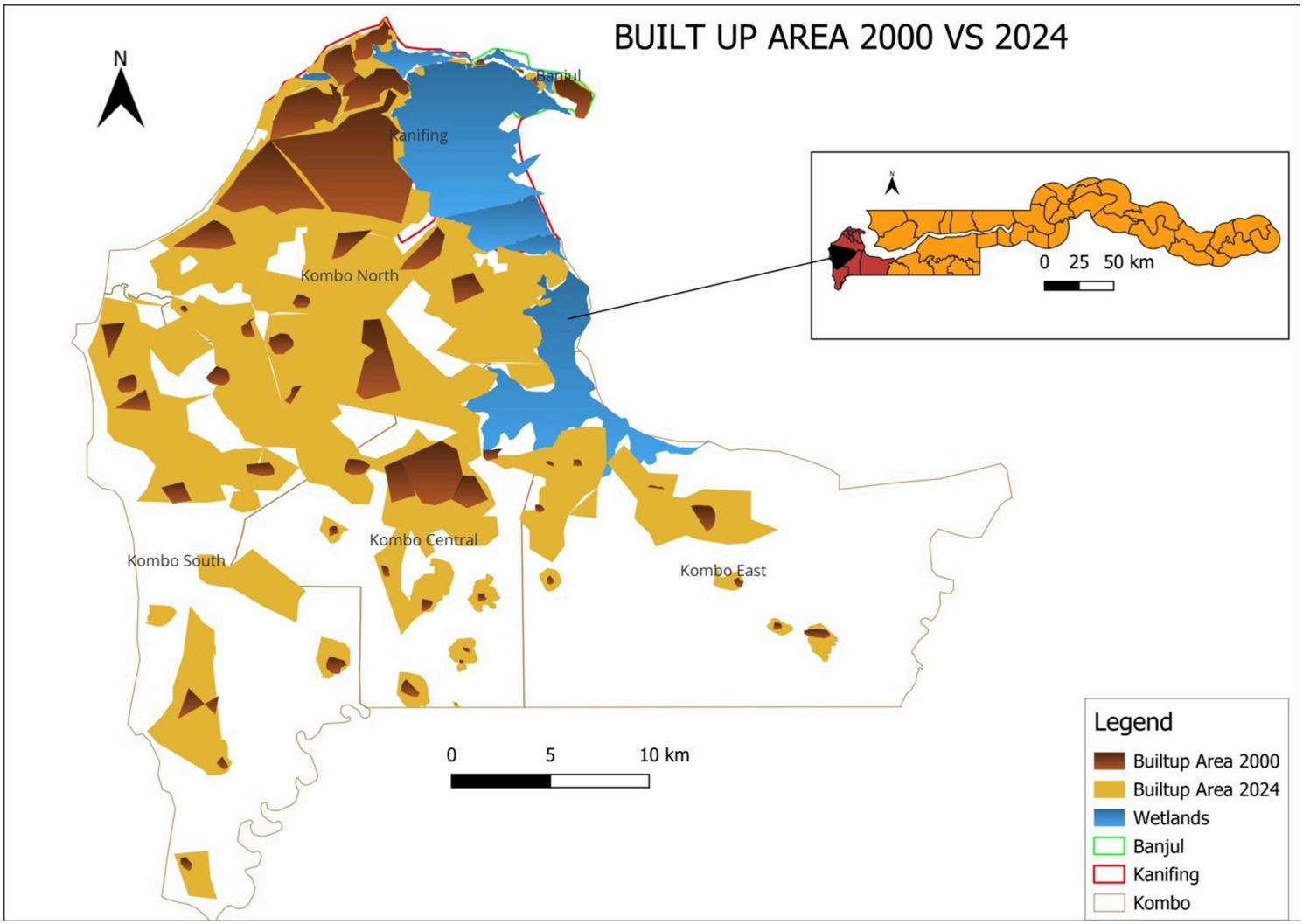


Figure 4

Comparison of the Greater Banjul Built up Area in 2000 and 2024

Source: Prepared by the author

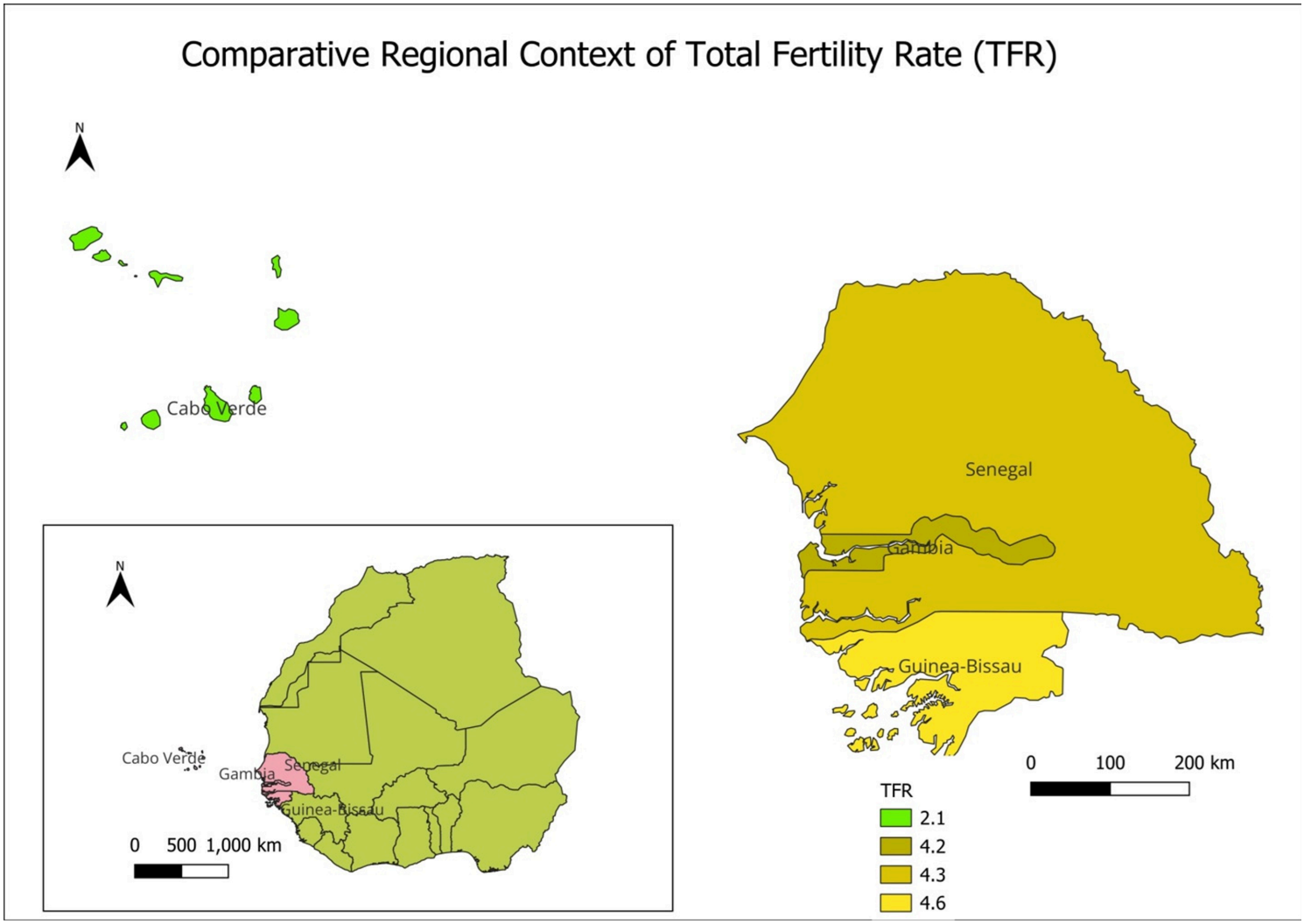


Figure 5

Source: Prepared by the author