



NAWEC WATCH

From GUC to NAWEC: Fifty-Four Years of Utility Services in the Gambia (1972–2026)

Introduction

The history of public utility services in the Gambia is a history of recurring reforms, restructuring, investments, promises, and crises. Over the last five decades, the sector has moved through four institutional arrangements:

1. Gambia Utilities Corporation (GUC) – 1972 to 1992
2. Utilities Holding Corporation (UHC) – 1992 to 1996
3. Management Services Gambia (MSG) – 1992 to 1995
4. National Water and Electricity Company (NAWEC) – 1996 to present

Each restructuring was justified as the solution to persistent failures in electricity and water service delivery. Yet the same problems continue to confront the nation today.

This report is the first in a series of NAWEC Watch publications. It provides a historical overview of the country's utility sector from the establishment of the Gambia Utilities Corporation in 1972, through the Utilities Holding Corporation and Management Services Gambia, to the creation and evolution of the National Water and Electricity Company. The objective is to place the current challenges facing the sector within their historical context and to better understand why, after more than five decades of reforms and investments, reliable utility services remain an unfinished national project.

1972 – Establishment of Gambia Utilities Corporation (GUC)

The Gambia Utilities Corporation Act created GUC as a state-owned utility responsible for electricity and water services. At the time, electricity coverage was largely confined to Banjul and a few urban centres. Water infrastructure was limited. Rural electrification was almost non-existent. Generation depended entirely on imported petroleum products. Under President Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara, GUC focused on expanding access while operating under severe financial constraints.

Major Achievements

- Expansion of electricity services beyond Banjul.
- Development of Kotu power facilities.
- Expansion of water supply systems.
- Extension of services to major provincial towns.
- Establishment of technical and administrative capacity.

Major Challenges

- Chronic underinvestment.
- Aging generation equipment.
- Rising fuel costs.
- Growing demand outstripping supply.



- Frequent service interruptions.
- Weak maintenance culture.

By the late 1980s, electricity shortages had become common and public dissatisfaction was growing.

1992 – Creation of Utilities Holding Corporation (UHC)

Faced with mounting financial and operational challenges, Government dissolved GUC and created the Utilities Holding Corporation (UHC) through a Presidential Executive Order. The objective was to restructure utility management and improve operational performance. This represented one of the earliest major attempts at utility reform in The Gambia.

1992 – Management Services Gambia (MSG)

UHC entered into a lease and management arrangement with SOGEA, a foreign utility management company. SOGEA established Management Services Gambia Ltd (MSG) to operate and manage the utility assets. The expectation was that private-sector management would:

- i. Improve efficiency.
- ii. Increase revenue collection.
- iii. Reduce losses.
- iv. Improve service delivery.
- v. Restore financial viability.

Outcome

The arrangement failed to achieve the expected transformation. Persistent problems included:

- Poor financial performance.
- Operational inefficiencies.
- Continued service interruptions.
- Consumer dissatisfaction.

In February 1995, the arrangement was terminated and management reverted to UHC.

1994 – Jammeh Takes Power

When Yaya Jammeh took power in July 1994, electricity supply was already a major national challenge. The utility infrastructure was old. Generation capacity was inadequate. Demand was growing rapidly. The military junta repeatedly promised to permanently solve the electricity crisis.

1996 – Creation of NAWEC

In June 1996, Government established the National Water and Electricity Company (NAWEC) as a public limited liability company. NAWEC inherited the assets and responsibilities of UHC.



The objectives were:

- Commercialization.
- Professional management.
- Improved service delivery.
- Financial sustainability.
- Expanded infrastructure investment.

Jammeh Era (1996–2017)

Over the next twenty years, electricity became one of the most politically sensitive issues in the country. Almost every year brought new promises, new generators, new contracts, and new assurances that power cuts would soon end.

Major Investments

- a. 1996–2005
 - Expansion of Kotu Power Station.
 - Acquisition of new generators.
 - Rehabilitation of distribution networks.
 - Expansion of provincial electricity systems.
- b. 2005–2010
 - Emergency generation projects.
 - Development of Brikama power facilities
 - Additional diesel generation units.
 - Expansion of rural electrification.
- c. 2010–2017
 - New generation facilities.
 - Water infrastructure projects.
 - Increased donor engagement.
 - Preparatory work for regional interconnection.

Major Government Assurances

Throughout the Jammeh era, Gambians repeatedly heard:

- “Power cuts will soon be over.”
- “New generators have arrived.”
- “Generation capacity has increased.”
- “The electricity problem has been solved.”

Yet blackouts persisted.

Achievements

- Significant expansion of electricity access.
- Improved water distribution systems.
- Growth in installed generation capacity.
- Expansion of services beyond urban centres.



Failures

- Persistent nationwide blackouts.
- High technical and commercial losses.
- Poor maintenance.
- Financial instability.
- Weak governance systems.
- Heavy dependence on fuel imports.

By 2016, electricity remained unreliable despite two decades of interventions.

2017 – The Barrow Administration

President Adama Barrow inherited a utility company facing:

- High debt.
- Aging infrastructure.
- Limited generation capacity.
- Poor financial performance.

At the same time, the energy sector became one of the largest recipients of donor funding in Gambian history.

Major Investments (2017–2026)

1. Gambia Electricity Restoration and Modernization Project (GERMP): Over US\$160 million
2. Gambia Electricity Access Project (GEAP): Approximately US\$87 million
3. OMVG Interconnection: Over US\$1 billion regional project benefiting the Gambia.
4. Jambur Solar Project: 23 MW solar generation with battery storage.
5. MCC Threshold Program: US\$18.5 million.
6. GESREP: More than US\$22 million.

Additional Projects

- Rural electrification.
- New substations.
- High-voltage transmission lines.
- Distribution upgrades.
- Smart metering initiatives.

Collectively, these projects represent the largest energy-sector investment drive in Gambian history.

Major Promises (2017–2026)

- 2017: Following the Occupy Westfield protests, President Barrow assured Gambians that electricity problems would be resolved by the end of 2018.
- 2018–2020 Government repeatedly announced that new generation and donor-funded projects would stabilize supply.



- 2021–2024 Government argued that OMVG and regional integration would secure reliable electricity.
- 2024–2026 Government and NAWEC management repeatedly assured citizens that ongoing projects would eliminate persistent shortages.

Major Achievements Under Barrow

- National electricity access rose dramatically.
- Rural electrification expanded significantly.
- Utility-scale solar energy introduced.
- Transmission infrastructure modernized.
- OMVG interconnection completed.
- Electricity reached many previously unserved communities.

These achievements are real and should be acknowledged.

Major Failures and Continuing Challenges

- Energy Dependence:** Despite unprecedented investment, energy sovereignty remains unachieved as the Gambia remains heavily dependent on imported electricity.
- Financial Distress:** NAWEC continues to face high debt levels, arrears to suppliers, cash flow constraints, and revenue collection challenges.
- Reliability Problems:** Citizens continue to experience prolonged blackouts, voltage fluctuations, service interruptions, and water supply disruptions.
- Governance Concerns:** Audit reports, parliamentary reviews, and public investigations have repeatedly raised concerns regarding financial management, procurement, internal controls, project implementation, and operational efficiency.

The Central Question

The question confronting Gambians in 2026 is not whether money has been invested. It has. The question is why more than five decades of reforms, restructuring, donor support, political promises, and billions of dalasi in expenditure have not produced reliable, affordable, and sustainable utility services.

- The institutional names have changed: GUC. UHC. MSG. NAWEC.
- Presidents have changed: Jawara. Jammeh. Barrow.
- Managing directors have changed.
- Ministers have changed.
- Projects have changed. Donors have changed.

Yet the fundamental complaints of citizens remain remarkably similar: unreliable electricity, inadequate water supply, financial crises, and endless promises of improvement.

This is why **NAWEC Watch** is necessary. The issue is no longer simply infrastructure. It is governance, accountability, performance, and leadership.



Conclusion

More than fifty years after the creation of GUC and thirty years after the establishment of NAWEC, the Gambia continues to struggle with unreliable electricity and water services despite repeated reforms, institutional restructuring, massive investments, donor support, and countless political promises. The transition from GUC to UHC, MSG, and finally NAWEC was intended to improve efficiency, sustainability, and service delivery, yet the fundamental challenges confronting citizens remain largely unchanged.

The evidence suggests that the utility crisis is not primarily a consequence of inadequate funding, lack of technical knowledge, or insufficient projects. Rather, it is rooted in persistent governance failures, weak planning, mismanagement, poor oversight, and the absence of accountability. While important gains have been made in expanding access to electricity and water, these achievements have not translated into reliable, affordable, and sustainable utility services for all Gambians.

As NAWEC Watch demonstrates, the central challenge facing the utility sector today is not infrastructure alone but leadership and accountability. Until decision-makers are held responsible for performance, resources are managed transparently, and long-term planning takes precedence over short-term promises, the Gambia risks continuing the cycle of investments without results and promises without delivery. The future of the country's development, economy, and sovereignty depends on breaking that cycle.

2026 – The Year of Empowerment and Accountable Leadership

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