

‘On arriving in Africa, I felt I didn’t need electricity any more’

Adrian Corish is working to prevent migrants making perilous illegal journey to Europe



Right: Rescued migrants disembarking off the Italian Guardia Costiera vessel in Sicily on Friday. Photograph: Alberto Pizzoli/AFP. Left: Adrian Corish

Adrian Corish

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Everyone thought I was crazy when I moved to [Africa](#) in 1989. I was going to live in a place with no televisions, no electricity and a high risk of malaria, and at a time when so many other Irish were leaving in search of better lives in the US or England.

I had a different view of a “better life”. I needed to find more meaning. I had married very young, at 18, and joined the Army to provide for my family. My wife died several years later, and I went soul-searching. I moved around the world a lot, especially Europe, but found it difficult to make connections.

Work brought me to west Africa in 1989, to work as a security officer for a shipping company based on the Isle of Man. I travelled a lot working for it, all around [Liberia](#), but about 10 years ago I settled in [Gambia](#), where I live with my second wife and our children.

When I arrived in Africa I plugged out, quite literally: I didn’t feel that I needed electricity any more. I wanted to live life in a simpler way. Whether you have a TV or not, or have electricity or not, doesn’t matter. They are not the important things in life. I became more of a humanitarian, less materialistic.

In 2008 I was appointed head of security in charge of 100 personnel on a 200km road project in Gambia. This brought me to remote rural locations where villagers may never have seen a white person. Sometimes they ran away, or would want to touch my skin. Their way of life is very basic, living in grass huts. It was a very grounding experience.

One of the things I noticed very quickly was the drain of youth in these villages. I discovered that they were heading for Europe through the back door – to [Libya](#), across the desert and up to [Morocco](#). Their motivations

were economic. Their parents sold land, cattle and everything else they had to send their young sons away.

More than 900 migrants have already died this month trying to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe. The European Union and others focus on the refugees fleeing war-torn countries like [Syria](#) and [Somalia](#), but many are economic migrants, leaving by choice because they think the streets of Europe are paved with gold.

Most of the migrants leaving Gambia are from rural areas. Their education is limited, and they believe the stories they hear about Europe. But most of them don't realise that it's a perilous journey that they may never return from, that could kill them.

The EU has been talking this week about "practical measures" to strengthen borders, fight smugglers and improve search-and-rescue efforts, but they need to be looking at the cause rather than the cure, about what can be done to prevent migrants travelling in these ships in the first place.

Potential migrants need to be educated about the journey they are planning to undertake, about what it is like to work illegally in Europe, and about trafficking risks. I have come to [Spain](#) now to lobby the EU on the need for local sensitisation programmes.

It is all about information. There is unprecedented unemployment in Europe. These migrants think that if they come to Europe they will be able to send money back to their families, but they are wrong. They will be lucky if they even reach the shores of Morocco.

I want to get access to the detention centres in Libya, Spain, Italy and Morocco, to film what life is like there, and to travel around the villages of Gambia first of all, spreading the word about the reality of illegal migration to Europe.

It is an issue I feel passionately about, which is why I've come to Spain to work on this full time. I am a single voice, which is challenging, but I am determined. Too many people are dying, and this is what I feel I can do to help.

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