



SOUTH SUDANESE COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION IN VICTORIA INC

South Sudanese Community Association in Victoria

Written Submission

Inquiry into Migrant Settlement Outcomes

30 January 2017

The South Sudanese Community Association in Victoria Inc. (SSCAV) welcomes the opportunity to submit a written response to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Migrant Settlement Outcomes.

The submission provides information and recommendations for the Committee's consideration. We would be pleased to meet with the Committee to discuss the issues.

The South Sudanese Community Association in Victoria

The SSCAV is the main representative community body for South Sudanese Australians living in Victoria. Its aims are to support the South Sudanese community in Victoria, provide representation and leadership in initiatives and events that support the community.

The association was formed in the 1990's. There have been many prior leadership teams. This leadership team came into existence on 15 April 2015 after state-wide elections. The Chairman is Mr Kot Monoah, who is based in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. The SSCAV is overseen by a board comprising of nineteen members and includes three Youth Representatives.

The SSCAV and leadership team undertake their work for the association on a voluntary basis. They are regularly engaged in planned and unplanned activities outside business hours and on weekends.

Many South Sudanese community members seek support from their community leaders, church, elders and members. In this way, the SSCAV is often a point of first contact when events and crises affecting the community arise.

The context of the SSCAV submission

The SSCAV and the members of the Australian South Sudanese community acknowledge and are very concerned that a number of young people of South Sudanese origin have engaged in serious criminal activities.

These events have been directly harmful to the victims of the crimes and created considerable anxiety among many other Victorians. Media coverage, both accurate and inaccurate, has fuelled negative public perceptions of Australian South Sudanese people.

The community is concerned that the level of negative media attention it is receiving is increasing the incidence of racial discrimination and stereotyping for the community in general, especially people being wrongly associated to the so called 'Apex' gang. The brunt of the negative attention is falling on innocent community members and is a major concern.

Victoria Police has been working hard to improve its policing procedures with the South Sudanese and other communities, yet many young people are feeling they are targeted by police because of their skin colour or perceived notoriety gained by the so called Apex Gang with wrong stereotyping and emphasis on South Sudanese Australians.

The SSCAV is strongly committed to the development and implementation of policies and programs that will respond effectively to this problem and its root causes. For example, in recent times, we have initiated community led crime prevention initiatives. We have developed volunteer list to walk and patrol shopping centres in Melton and Wyndham. These shopping centres and fast food outlets have been affected by youth activities some deemed to be a public threat and some borne out of fear mongering due to media publicity.

The SSCAV has advised and worked in collaboration with state and federal authorities and agencies on matters relating to the community broadly and in relation to issues specific to this inquiry. For example, the SSCAV recently received state funding for empower youth grant. This funding will be used to hire youth workers and mentors who can empower South Sudanese youth in Victoria to find employment. This is an equivalent of diversionary project to empower youth with employment.

The settlement of South Sudanese people in Victoria

Most of the South Sudanese community that have settled in Victoria arrived under the Humanitarian Program in the 1990's and early 2000's. Recently, there has been interstate migration into Victoria, for reasons of affordable housing.

The South Sudanese community has faced many challenges during settlement that are common to other people of refugee backgrounds and migrants. These include learning a new language, understanding and becoming familiar with an unfamiliar culture and society, with new complex systems of health, education, welfare and law.

The differences between traditional and Australian parenting practices have been a particular difficult area for some and are described in greater detail below.

As refugees, South Sudanese have had to deal with traumatic reactions to past events, including decades of civil conflict. The renewed conflict in South Sudan also has an impact on communities in Australia.

Another significant barrier to settlement has been racial hostility and discrimination in sections of the Australian community. This has made it more difficult for people of South Sudanese in areas such as getting jobs and housing.

Of particular community concern is the extent that young people face discrimination in school, which becomes a point of grief, and can result in disengagement from education. With parents and elders often busy with their work to support families, young people can find themselves without mentors or modelling. **Many young people are bullied and discriminated and when they complained to the teachers, their complaints are ignored. Some young people may succumb to pressure and take things in their hands. The issue is then escalated and this could in many cases lead to expulsion. Some just drop out of school as they schools become places of bullying, harassments and discrimination. They drop out of school and no employment.**

It is recommended that bi-cultural workers or teacher's aide be employed to help youth people in schools.

The need for proper understanding about the involvement of 'young migrants' in criminal gangs

The inquiry has a particular focus on resettlement issues and social engagement of youth migrants, including involvement of youth migrants in anti-social behaviour such as gang activity. There has been particular media and public concern focused on these issues in relation to youth in Victoria. It is important that there is more clarification of who is meant by 'young migrants' in the context of this inquiry.

In order to develop targeted strategies to address the problem of youth migrants involved in gangs committing serious criminal offences, the Inquiry should obtain good evidence about

- how many young people are involved
- who they are and
- why are they involved?

SSCAV believes that much media reporting has been misleading about the situation and therefore not helpful to a proper understanding of the causes and what measures are needed to deal with the problems.

There has been a lot said about the so-called "Apex gang" as if there is a single well-organised group of people of similar backgrounds who know each other well and act together and are responsible for all similar crimes.

For the SSCAV, the young people it represents includes those who arrived at a young age and those that are now born or raised since a young age in Australia, and amongst these youth are those who may be considered at risk or engaged in criminal or antisocial activities.

Settlement-related issues affecting the South Sudanese community in Australia and proposals to improve outcomes

Assisting South Sudanese parents

For parents and elders who are accustomed to traditional practices from their homelands of raising children collectively in the village and community, traditional forms of discipline and guidance often no longer hold in the Australian resettlement context. For both young people at risk or in risk behaviours, the community can find it hard to provide enough support, especially in the context of new and different education, legal and social contexts.

The SSCAV feels that an important area for more support is helping parents, as many feel that they are challenged and disempowered to help their children and young people in Australia.

Parenting styles are known to differ cross-culturally. South Sudanese parents are traditionally more authoritarian in their style than in Australia. Children are expected to follow rules established by their parents, that have continued across generations and children who do not follow these rules are usually punished. South Sudanese traditionally see parenting and disciplining of children as a collective responsibility that involves all the members of the community, though in Australia is not allowed to discipline children other than your own in public. Parents and elders place great emphasis on respect of elders and hierarchical authority and responsibility to the collective. According to South Sudanese culture, any adult in the community is allowed to discipline a child whom she or he found misbehaving in public.¹

Many parents feel they have lost their regulatory powers over their children since coming to Australia as a result of the different values and parenting styles here, and especially as a result of the rights and freedoms given to them by authorities (such as schools, legal system, child protection authorities and police).

For parents and elders, lack of language skills can create intergenerational gaps and tensions as children more readily pick up the new language and knowledge about Australian culture, values and practices in their new environment.

Many parents and community elders express concern that their children are learning different values and concepts of rights and responsibilities that distance and disrupt more traditional ways of disciplining and guiding young people.

Parents want to be listened to with regards to their concerns as well as find ways to integrate education about the host environment alongside their own cultural practices through dialogue and collaboration with the community and other services.

¹ Santino Atem Deng, (February 2016). *South Sudanese family dynamics and parenting practices in Australia*. African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP) Proceedings of the 38th AFSAAP Conference: 21st Century Tensions and Transformation in Africa, Deakin University, 28th-30th October, 2015. Accessed on January 10 2017 from: http://afsaap.org.au/assets/Santino_Deng_AFSAAP2015.pdf

Deng's (2016) research on South Sudanese family dynamics and parenting practices in Australia describes the significance of addressing these changes and challenges through better frameworks for discussing parenting practices in collaboration with migrant families, such as about what is or not negotiable concerning parenting practices in their new country. It also points to research that suggests there is a need for the laws around child protection (discussed later) and parenting to include educational and early intervention programs or parenting groups to address some of the underlying issues facing those such as the South Sudanese community in Australia.

There is a need to better assist parents to understand Australian society, laws, values and rights and responsibilities that also responds to their concerns and aspirations for positive parenting practices in the resettlement context. For example, programs that aim at educating and orientating people pre-and upon arrival in Australia could be adapted and developed to run in community-based settings. This may need to be adapted for a repeated and community-based program to allow for young people and parents to develop their understanding and how to address challenges and conflicts that emerge during resettlement.

Positive Parenting Programs, which is a multi-level, prevention oriented parenting and family support strategy have run in the past and are continued as one example of the type of program that could be funded by Federal or State government and run in association with community organisations such as the SSCAV.

As mentioned, the parenting styles, practices and values differ culturally between South Sudan and Australia. For many parents believe that traditional upbringing is being eroded, with parents having little sense of alternatives to help manage their children, many also feel unable to meet new challenges of young people who acculturate through language and culture more quickly. It is not uncommon for parents to want to know more about 'If their children experience this or that, what do you do?'

Many parents want to be more directly engaged in addressing issues that are occurring within families and the community, as well as improving services that can come to interact with these. Providing paid employment opportunities for parents to work in the development and delivery of programs would make these parenting education and early intervention programs both more integrated and responsive to the community and sustainable.

The engagement of community members with Child Protection Services

The engagement of families with Child Protection Services (CPS) is a matter of considerable concern within the Australian South Sudanese community. The power of CPS to remove children creates particular anxiety in a community with many families split by their experiences prior to settling in Australia. Separated from their families at a young age, many young people struggle to secure adequate housing arrangements, find employment or continue their studies, and become vulnerable to risky behaviours.

The preceding section notes the pressing need to improve the understanding of parents about Australian law and the role of CPS. SSCAV believes it would also be desirable for CPS to have greater engagement with the community in making decisions about what kinds of interventions may be necessary and appropriate in particular instances involving families of South Sudanese background.

One suggestion is the establishment of a Community Panel that can work alongside Child Protection Services. For instance when CPS has been alerted to a situation where a child may be at risk and has made an assessment, it can seek the advice and assistance of a Community Member who is trained in CPS policies. The Community Member could contribute contextual understanding that includes cultural and relational understanding and make observations that could contribute to problems being resolved without having to remove the child.

Recommendations

Establish tailored educational or early intervention programs for parents;

Include paid workers from within the community in their development and delivery;

Explore alternative models for child protection.

Improving educational engagement and outcomes for children and young people

The challenges in language, social and cultural learning and navigating a new system of education have meant there are significant barriers to young people adapting to school and remaining in school. Parents do not feel able to help their children, with many focused on finding work or busy working and unfamiliar themselves with how to connect young people with services training and problem solving in the Australian system.

Upon arriving in Australia, young people are assessed by age for placement into the Australian school system. In the community's experience, this is a serious problem for young people who have severely interrupted educations, especially those who had little or no English education or schooling.

Not all young South Sudanese refugees arriving in Victoria have had the same journeys which can affect their resettlement experiences. Many young people had fled conflict in South Sudan and went to refugee camps in East African countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda and spent significant periods of time there before coming to Australia directly from Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya for example. These camps, whilst challenging provided some opportunity for English language and basic schooling for some young people. For others, they fled to other countries spending time in urban settings, such as in Cairo, Egypt. In this instance there was no opportunity for English language studies or skills development, other than in Arabic.

As indicated above, another issue for young South Sudanese that is commonly voiced is that they encounter racial discrimination in schools. Many young people describe the difficulties this causes and regard it as a key reason for disengagement.

Young people who have trouble at school are at risk of falling through gaps between school, family and the systems in which their ability to find work or get supports.

The SSCAV encourages further research and support to programs that can help reduce prejudice and discrimination in the school setting and increase understanding and cohesion amongst Australian youth.

Recommendations

SSCAV requests the Inquiry to recommend that school systems develop and provide school-based programs that:

Support students' learning and language needs;

Reduce racial discrimination and encourage students to remain schools.

Support expelled students to be rehabilitated in alternative avenues and divert them from criminal activities.

Development of tailored welfare services

Agencies assisting vulnerable young people with issues such as their use of alcohol and other drugs, or mental health problems, should be encouraged and enabled to develop their services so that they are accessible and responsive to the young people of diverse backgrounds. Members of communities do frequently provide advice to agencies and this can be very demanding given the other demands on their time. The funding of agencies should allow them to employ bi-cultural staff.

There is also an important place for services to be run by 'ethnic communities' themselves. At present the SSCAV comprises entirely of volunteers, who for the most part work during the day and are time-poor. As organisations like SSCAV are increasingly points of contact for community members such as concerned parents, the media, police and other services then it is imperative to provide funding to ensure these can operate in a sustainable way and during business hours. Only a modest amount, for example for the employment of an office Manager and Program Officer, and 5 other staff members would be needed to greatly increase the organisation's capacity.

Development of community-based recreational activities for young people

The development of community-based leisure and sporting programs for young people can:

- promote the settlement of young people generally and
- provide a context to assist those who are particularly at risk of disengagement with specialist help.

SSCAV believes that such programs should be offered both by mainstream organisations for young people in general and by particular communities directed towards young people of those communities.

Within Australia and internationally there are examples of sports and recreation activities that are successfully appealing to and engaging disadvantaged youth. In the Victorian context, North Melbourne and Collingwood football clubs currently run well-regarded outreach programs for youth people. There is a need for similar work to be done in the western suburbs of Melbourne, where such opportunities are less available – the Western Bulldogs would be an obvious candidate to host such activities.

Community organisations would require government funding to run similar programs. Small and newly emerging communities cannot themselves generate the resources required to pay staff, hire premises, purchase equipment and so forth.

A proposal for the delivery of integrated services

Young people in the community represent at various points of vulnerability. The SSCAV believes it is vitally important to support young people in their education and in employment opportunities, as well as providing integral sports and recreation programs that are community based and engage bi-cultural workers.

As indicated above, SSCAV considers that community-based leisure and sporting programs generally could also provide a context within which young people who are particularly at risk of disengagement can be identified and referred to receive specialist help.

A proposal of this kind has been suggested by members of the SSCAV to address the needs and realities of young South Sudanese Australians and the communities in which they live.

A spacious multi-functional community centre would allow for some drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, youth workers, sport and recreation facilities, classes such as language and cultural training and some food for those in need. Referrals into and out of the centre would also help to connect direct service providers such as schools, health centres, the police and the Department of Human Services.

It would help if community-based English language classes were tailored to community needs (such as including information about Australian laws, systems and values) and were available through a local community centre, such as the one proposed.

There is a need for consultative, participatory improvement of resettlement services and this centre would be an innovative and community-driven approach to improving outcomes for the community. The proposed community centre could be a welcoming place for young people to congregate and offer constructive sports and recreational activities. It could help link young people directly and concerned families through information, referrals and community education programs. It could help families be better aware of what services exist and improving how linked in they are – such as services in mental health, drug and rehab, could help families and communities manage youth problems and help make direct referrals for youth.

The centre/s would be based in areas where there is higher concentration of community members such as in the Western suburbs of Melbourne and South East.

Recommendations

SSCAV requests the Inquiry to recommend that state and federal government support the further development of:

- Tailored welfare services that address so that they are accessible and responsive to the young people of diverse backgrounds;
- The funding of agencies in order to employ bi-cultural staff;
- Direct funding to community organisations to provide welfare services;
- Offer youth-focused sports and recreational activities in the community;
- Consider proposals for more integrated service delivery models that are community-based.

Concerns regarding cancellation of visas and deportation under Section 501 Migration Act 1958

Strategies focused on prevention and rehabilitation should be at the fore when exploring ways to address young offenders. The emphasis of our suggestions are for young people, their parents and community elders to be helped or supported by the above mentioned improvements to resettlement and welfare services, better community linked services with police or government agencies for those young offenders who are at risk of engagement in criminal activities. There is a need for improved support services and rehabilitation for young people to mitigate risks of becoming involved with the criminal justice system.

The SSCAV wants consideration to be given to processes relating to the Migration Act 1985, specifically those community leaders are involved in any initiation of Section 501. If any young South Sudanese in Victoria is identified as at risk of deportation, members of the community, such as the SSCAV, should be consulted as early as possible and at every stage of any such process.

Many parents have also identified their young ones as potentially encroaching into the criminal path. These parents have suggested community led or parents initiated removal of young persons from Australia for an interim period to provide a gap year. This gap year removes young person from their peers who are a bad influence and put them in a boarding schools overseas. This has helped many young people as they get to mature and have alternative perspectives about lives and appreciation of the opportunities available in Australia as a result of a gap year experience.

Recommendations:

-Allow parents to initiate applications before the tribunals or relevant statutory bodies to remove their children for a gap year experience.

-Support youth during gap year to study in boarding schools overseas by paying their youth allowance subject to school enrolment and verification.

SSCAV requests the Inquiry to recommend that state and federal government:

1. Focus on preventative and rehabilitative services for youth at risk or engaged in unlawful behaviour;
2. Engage communities in working with authorities in relation to young people at risk of or involved in criminal activity;
3. Engage communities in working with commonwealth and state authorities to explore measures to be put in place to avert cancellation of visa and deportation.
4. Fund community led crime prevention initiatives so that community can work with government and shopping centre management and areas where young people congregate or suspected of criminal behaviour.

**Kot Monoah
Chairman
South Sudanese Community Association**