

The Challenges Facing South Sudanese Refugees in the Australia's Housing Sector

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Abstract

High costs in Australian housing markets have brought the significant consequences to the economically and socially disadvantaged South Sudanese community and other minority ethnic groups in Australia. Housing plays an efficient and effective role in the durable integration and settlement of South Sudanese in Australia. The current Australian housing market is constructed in a way that does not provide affordable housing for South Sudanese refugees. Nevertheless, it is of paramount importance to recognise the significance of housing and the consequences of the high cost of housing in South Sudanese refugees' economic, social and cultural integration which eventually can enhance their social harmony with the wider Australian community. Economic participation, access to community resources, public facilities, social and cultural capitals and other functions can help in facilitating access to housing. This paper aims to highlight the difficulties facing South Sudanese refugees' community in the Australia's housing system. The paper considers historical, structural, political and economical disadvantages Sudanese refugees have experienced as a result of the Sudan's civil wars. Such historical experience is crucial because of the role it plays in South Sudanese refugees' settlement issues and matters concerning language, identity, citizenship, adjustment and social exclusion. This paper is a description of the issues raised by the interviews with South Sudanese and stakeholders in South Australia. It aims to contribute to the existing planning and housing studies, housing policy and to better inform government departments and service providers about the South Sudanese refugees' perspectives about affordable housing situation.

Keywords: Australia, South Sudanese refugees, economic participation, integration, housing system

Introduction

Soon after her independence in 1956 and continuing to 2005, Sudan experienced civil wars. Historically, the first conflict begun shortly after Sudan's obtained full self-determination from British administration in 1955. This war came to end after more than a decade of civil unrest with the regionally mediated Addis Ababa Peace Accord in 1972 (Atem, 2011b). The second and one of the longest conflicts in South Sudanese region and certainly in the world begun on 16th of May, 1983 and ended with the internationally mediated and monitored Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Kenyan capital Nairobi 2005, between the Northern Sudanese Government and former Southern Sudanese rebel movement known as Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (Atem, 2011b). The second civil war has claimed more than two million of lives, internally displaced more than five million people and also resulted in hundreds of thousands of Southern Sudanese refugees to migrate to other countries such as Australia seeking safe haven. The recent peace accord (CPA) has enabled the Southern Sudan region to achieve her independence through regionally and internationally monitored referendum vote in January 2011. The Southern Sudanese opted for secession from Northern Sudan with more than 99 percent voting for independence for South Sudan in the referendum in January, 2011. As a result, South Sudan became an independent country on the 9th of July 2011 making South Sudan the 54th country in Africa and the 193rd members of the United Nations and the wider international community. The region of South Sudan is gifted in natural resources such as oil, gold, agricultural land, wild life, forestry and other vital natural resources but oil is the key which fuelled the civil war over the years between Northern and South. Despite South Sudan being rich in oil and many other natural resources, the country is one of the poorest and most undeveloped nations in the modern world. Due to the dehumanisation, discrimination, political oppression, economic and social instability and repercussions related to two civil wars, tens of thousands South Sudanese refugees arrived in Australia in the last decade. This newly emerging community is faced with significant trauma rooted in past historical and political oppressions in their country of origin (Atem, 2011b). The Sudanese community is experiencing housing problems as a result of numerous issues which are discussed in later sections of this paper. Housing plays a pivotal role in the settlement of refugees in Australia, especially for the Southern Sudanese as it enables individual families to participate and access other human resources such as employment, health facilities, educational activities and many more in the wider Australian community.

In addition, this paper examines recent research findings with Sudanese refugees and stakeholders in relation to national and international empirical studies which explore the settlement challenges involve in Sudanese refugees' access to affordable housing in South Australia. It appears that Sudanese refugees' access to affordable housing is impeded for by lack of financial resources, limited social networks, unemployment and lack of English proficiency. These problems are coupled with a decrease in in the supply of affordable housing in Australia which is an issue compounded by recent neoliberal housing reforms as recently explained by Professor Brendan Gleeson (2006). Equally, studies by Beer, Bridget and Hans (2007; Forster 2006); Gabriel and Jacobs and also Caulfield 2000) have suggested that neoliberal policies have had negative role present housing affordability problems in Australian society.

Research methodology

The qualitative data used in this paper was from interviews with South Australian Sudanese refugees and interviews with key informants in the community services sector who discussed affordable housing challenges facing the Sudanese community. The author uses a mixed methods strategy both quantitative and qualitative methodological approach to collect data. This strategy has enabled the researcher to determine and appropriately interpret the housing issues emerged from the research participants. The focus groups interviews with Sudanese refugees and individual in-depth interviews with key informants generated understanding about settlement and housing issues. The quantitative data was obtained from survey questionnaires where the researcher accessed Sudanese participants through Sudanese community events and also accessed subjects through relevant community agencies. Survey respondents were asked if they wished to take part in group interviews on the

topics covered in the survey. The researcher received 137 responses out of an overall survey sample of 500 South Australian Sudanese refugees. The completed questionnaires of the Sudanese participants were returned to the researcher via postage paid envelopes. Sudanese focus group participants were recruited from survey questionnaires but only those who agreed and provided their contact details were contacted and participated in group interviews facilitated by the author.

Currently, it is estimated that there are more than 24,000 Sudanese in Australia and majority this population came between 2001 and 2006 (Marlowe 2009). Based on overall Sudanese population, South Australia has an approximately 5000 Sudanese which means that current study's survey is approximately 2.7% of the Sudanese refugees settling in South Australia making it reasonably representative of South Australian Sudanese community. Out of the 137 survey respondents, 40 respondents agreed to take part in the focus group interviews and 25 participants were interviewed. The writings of Kreuger (1998; in Smithson, 2008; Morgan, 1988; Hussey and Hussey, 1997; Taylor and Bogdan, 1998; and Bryman, 2001) described the application of focus group interviews. The interviews were conducted in English but Sudanese refugees were from tribally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The researcher (a Sudanese person himself) was able to speak some languages but he was assisted by interpreters who could explain questions from English to local Sudanese dialects. There also individual in-depth interviews with (14) stakeholders, mainly the service providers who were assisting Sudanese and other refugee groups in South Australia to access accommodation, writing support letters to the land agents and contacting South Australian Government housing sector on behalf of the refugees. The interviews with stakeholders range from 30-40 minutes each; all interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed after the completion of interviews. The research methodology was approved by the University of South Australia's human research ethics committee.

Results and Discussion

This part of the paper discusses some of the key housing issues which emerged from qualitative data. The author extracted primary statements in relation to employment, family size, affordability issues and income, integration and discrimination. In this paper quotations from participants are used with analysis and integration of some ideas from the literature. It is acknowledged that Australia has been facing a critical housing shortage, especially during the last decade where major Australian cities are affected limited accommodation (Wilson et al. 2010). The lack of affordable housing is impacting on economically disadvantaged Australians, especially the Sudanese refugees as they have recently arrived in Australia and have limited financial capital (Atem, 2010a). This issue and other settlement problems were raised in the focus group discussions with Sudanese and also in the in-depth interviews with stakeholders. For example, one key informant participant in an interview explained issues relating to Sudanese family size and their financial issues by stating that:

“...For the Sudanese people, they arrive here, they've got a whole family and suddenly they've got to find a house big enough to take the whole family and accommodate the lot. While, at the same time, they don't have an income that is suitable for that. They don't have a chance to build up a profession or career or whatever, so their income is extremely limited” (key informant).

The statement above highlights that it is challenging for newly arrived Sudanese families to access appropriate housing in Australian housing market primarily due to larger family units and limited financial resources. Social security payments are insufficient to meet the rising private rental prices in the major urban cities such as Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney where household income is certainly not meeting housing costs (Kearins et al. 2004). The present study established that the average weekly rent in Adelaide, where this study was held, is approximately \$300, this is a lot for those receiving social security payments. Nevertheless, the rental cost differs from suburb to suburb

depending where residents are seeking rental accommodation in Adelaide. Residential location is important in Sudanese refugees' housing search because some areas are more expensive than others.

Furthermore, housing and unemployment are the key social issues impacting on Sudanese refugees' settlement in Australia. Interviews with Sudanese participants and informants have revealed that the critical issues for Sudanese in finding affordable and appropriate housing is dependent on their employment status but also impeded by issues like the cost of rent, the size of families, cultural factors and the cultural need for separate sitting areas for men and women. On the problem of employment, one Sudanese married man with two children and unemployed explained that:

For me I'm not really feeling happy because I try to get a job. I couldn't get a job so I thought that I'll apply for a short course. I did Disability Certificate III. I finish, I start looking for a job, I didn't find. It's really hard. Sometimes we apply for a job, they didn't call you. You can't just stay on Centrelink (Social Security) money. It's not enough. We have kids, we have things to do, and our kids want to go to school. Everything is really hard. If it's not money, Centrelink money they can't pay your kids in school, you need to pay by yourself. Everything is hard. Even about the house, it's hard to get the house. You apply for house, you fill the form, next following day you will call them, they will say no, and someone took the house" (Sudanese participant, cited in Atem, 2011b).

The statement above indicates the frustrations and challenges faced by Sudanese migrants in accessing employment in Australia. Employment as reported in migration literature as a key to not only successful settlement but also facilitating overall wellbeing of migrants and their participation in social institutions such as education, social status and mental health (Atem, 2011b; Atem and Wilson, 2008; and also Haan, 2001). The current study found that the vast majority of Sudanese refugees residing in South Australia and certainly in Australia are economically at the lower ladder of income and are underrepresented in the workforce. Moreover, participants in this study further revealed it takes several months or even years for them to acquire paid employment. Migration literature, especially the writings of Carter, Polevychok and Osborne (2009; Torezani, Colic-Peisker and Fozdar, 2008; Colic-Peisker 2006; and also Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2003) have explained several factors that often impede the ability of migrants to participate in the employment in the host country like Australia. Another issue identified during the interviews with Sudanese and stakeholders in this study in relation to access to housing was that many Sudanese refugees are discriminated by the landlords and real estate agents on the basis of their family size, financial situation, racial background, and also because of limited English proficiency. Especially, family size emerged as a major concern for the landlords, this impacted on Sudanese refugees' ability to find private rental accommodation in South Australia. An informant explained in an interview that:

Depending on the situation for the family it can take sometimes a couple of months and it can be looking at maybe 45 different houses before you get somewhere. This is just ridiculous that you have to go and see - even having to see 15 to 20 houses I'd say is ridiculous. Competition is so large and the demand heavily outweighs the supply and we've got a problem, a real big problem with housing (Stakeholder, cited in Atem, 2011b).

The informant's comment above shows the complexities involved in housing searches for Sudanese refugees, which are coupled with competition in the private rental market. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the explanation given above involves the lack of larger accommodation in the Australian housing market because the majority of housing is designed for smaller family units which contrasts with average South Sudanese family size. For instance, one of the Sudanese woman participants said during the focus group discussions that:

...most of the homes now in Australia are designed in a way that doesn't suit us migrants. Because migrants have large families that are really - sometimes it is really hard to fit into a

three bedroom house when you have seven kids and whatever. So it's really hard. My experience is if there is a way to redesign, the whole thing about housing then that would be great (Sudanese participant).

The woman's statement above shows a significant frustration facing Sudanese as they attempt to search for suitable for housing in Australia. The problems reported by the Sudanese and key informants in this study were similar to issues faced by Somalis refugees in the United States according to a study by Shio (2006). Similarly, studies by Beer and Foley (2003; Hinsliff, 2006; Findlay, 2011) have also reported issues concerning overcrowding among recent arrived migrant families including the Sudanese families.

The settlement difficulties facing Sudanese refugees in housing, employment or other areas such as cultural adaptation may diminish with time according to a key informant from a community service organisation who also argued that settlement was affected by the way Sudanese were defined by the police and the media. This informant stated that settlement

... takes far longer than it needs to do because of the compounding of all the difficulties and the problems. But it is not really - they are integrating. The issue is the society is not welcoming them the way - the Australian is multicultural affairs and country. Some don't feel they are most welcome the way they are defining them (Informant).

It should be acknowledged that full settlement takes time as does cultural adaptation and integration as evident in a qualified statement by a single mother with three children who was less optimistic about her situation in Australia

I could say actually 50 per cent. Not high as 100. I only say 50 per cent because there are a lot of things actually that are still lacking 'cause I don't have a job actually I'm not working. I've been trying to get a job. I've applied many times and there are no positive outcomes of those applications and I'm still trying" (South Sudanese participant).

The importance placed on acquiring work is notable in the statement above. The acquisition of work either directly or through education was a recurrent theme in interviews with Sudanese for this research who clearly saw the acquisition of paid work as central to their capacity to settle successfully in Australia, acquire suitable housing and lead a good life. A married Sudanese man married with one child described this theme well

I have settled well because when I first came here, I worked for five years. After five years I went to Africa and get married and came back and went to university. My future is going to be good because I'm going to graduate next year and I will be working in professional labour as a social worker and my life is going to be good. There's nothing - I'm still in good health and I will be really working hard to make sure that I settle positively in Australia (South Sudanese participant).

While generally positive about their future in Australia and unwilling to accept that racism is a significant problem, Sudanese interviewed for this research were aware of being singled out by the majority culture in ways that were similar to their experiences of oppression in Sudan by postcolonial, Arab dominated governments in Khartoum, as discussed earlier in this research. As in any community there are occasionally crimes and sometimes violent crimes but when these crimes are committed by Sudanese in Australia the perpetrators and victims tend to be identified by the police and the media as Sudanese rather than as Australians. Labelling makes it more difficult for Sudanese migrants to see themselves as part of the Australian community. While they might not be overtly discriminated against in education and work they are defined as different when things go wrong. A father of five children raised some concerns in regards to this matter

My definition of integration is whether you have become like them. Like the people who you actually find in that society that you are living in. To become like them is, you have equal opportunity in employment, there's no discrimination, you are treated fairly like them, there's no singling out, that this is so this is a Sudanese, most of us have become dual citizens. But the fact that when one of us committed something to be regarded as a crime you're singled out as a Sudanese. So if any of - for example, the issue that is happening in Melbourne and Sydney about the Sudanese issue and also this unfortunate boy who was killed here, my expectation is that these are actual Australian, they became Australian citizens, but saying they are called Sudanese. So does it mean integration? For me, somebody, even if you say you are part of that society and you are still called by their labelling despite the fact that you have become part of it then you are singled out as different that makes, sometimes, integration difficult (South Sudanese participant).

The settlement difficulties facing Sudanese refugees in housing, employment or other areas such as cultural adaptation may diminish with time according to a key informant from a community service organisation who also argued that settlement was slowed by the way Sudanese were defined by the police and the media.

Conclusion

The South Sudanese community was forced to leave their homeland by war and cultural oppression that denied them human rights and a social and economic future. They have sought refuge in a country where their language skills are challenged and with a labour market that under values their knowledge and skills. Whilst most Sudanese interviewed for this research saw their new community as welcoming and not overtly racist there was a clear consciousness of difference and of barriers to communication that inhibited their capacity to acquire housing and settle in Australia.

The settlement of South Sudanese refugees in Australia and similar communities might require more research into the role of housing in settlement, particularly in relation to the average family size of refugee communities, their cultural needs and the design and size of the available supply of housing. Inclusive settlement policies might require the construction of larger housing to address the needs of humanitarian entrants with different family structures and cultural needs to those of established communities. Such an approach might create social and cultural fairness in Australian housing, which might empower the refugee community in their endeavours to settle well in Australia.

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