

THE EXPERIENCES
AND PERCEPTIONS OF
REFUGEES OF LOCAL
GOVERNMENT SERVICES
AND SUPPORT, FOCUSING
ON AFRICAN REFUGEES

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CENTRE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT



University of
South Australia

International Centre for
Muslim and non-Muslim
Understanding

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UTS: CLG wishes to thank the interviewees that participated in this research project. The research was funded by the University of South Australia's International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding (MnM Centre). The Centre is a response to the challenge set by one of Australia's most influential political and social figures: former Prime Minister, the Honourable Bob Hawke. Mr Hawke has made it his life's work to bring people from disparate backgrounds together to create common understanding in situations of dispute and confrontation. In fulfilling the mission set for it by Mr Hawke, the Centre focuses its research and community engagement activities on the triggers for prejudice that present barriers to dialogue. The vision of the MnM Centre is to be an internationally significant research centre, devoted to understanding and transcending the divide between Muslims and non-Muslims, with a strong socio-cultural focus that fosters informed relationships between cultures and identities. The Centre provides a unique forum in which scholars and PhD students develop and disseminate ideas within the framework of a broader social justice agenda.

The MnM Centre consists of a diverse community of scholars who engage intellectually and practically in questions of identity, security, citizenship and belonging, contemporary culture and politics, urban and spatial organisation, extremism and Islamophobia. Wherever possible, the research of the Centre is made accessible to external stakeholders to provide opportunities to engage in dialogue with the aim of continually building greater understanding and influencing positive change. Mediums through which research is disseminated include publications, the media, public speaking engagements, academic conferences and the MnM Centre's public fora. Its staff members and students recognise that broad understanding will not come simply through distributing facts to the general public, but that beliefs and attitudes must change. As a result, they are committed to research that provides people of all cultural and religious backgrounds with the impetus to consider new ways of thinking about other members of their communities while addressing how Muslims, in particular, fit into contemporary communities and cultures. Thus the focus of the MnM Centre's work – its research, its collaboration with other programs and people at the University of South Australia, and its engagement with local and international partners and communities – is identifying ways in which different communities can, should and do encounter and interact with each other.

1. Introduction and Context¹

This exploratory study investigates the challenges newly arrived African refugees in Australia face and how they perceive local government initiatives and support. The Report is divided into six sections. The first section contextualises the issues. The second section outlines the methodology employed. Sections 3, 4, 5 and 6 present and discuss the findings from the interviews conducted with African refugees and people who are employed to facilitate the settlement of African (and other) refugees. Initially this study was going to focus solely on African Muslim refugees and local government programs on offer for this group, however it became apparent that there were no local government initiatives that catered specifically for this grouping so the focus was extended to cover programs for African refugees and refugees in general.

Over the last decade between 10,000 and 13,000 people have entered Australia annually through the Refugee and Humanitarian Program – RHP (DIBP, 2011). Australia's Humanitarian Program aims to provide options for refugees who have been forced to leave their homes due to armed conflict, persecution and human rights abuses. For the 2014-15 financial year, the allocation for Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program was 13,750 places. More recently, as a response to the ongoing Syrian civil war, the Australian Government announced that it will make an extra 12,000 humanitarian places available for people displaced by the conflict in Syria and Iraq (Australian Government, 2015).

In the last two decades the number of refugees in Australia originating from African countries has increased substantially. Between June 1997 and June 2007, 22,445 refugees from Sudan were settled under the humanitarian program, 2,714 from Ethiopia, 2,477 from Sierra Leone, 2,373 from Somalia and 3,796 from Central and West Africa (ABS, 2008;). In 2009-10, 29% of all people settled in terms of Australia's Humanitarian Visa Program came from Africa (Department of Immigration and Border Protection Refugees, 2014; ABS, 2012). In 2013–14, most of the African refugees settled in Australia came from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (241); Eritrea (187); Somalia (185) and Ethiopia (129) (Karlsen, 2015).

¹ This is stage 2 of this exploratory study. The Stage 1 Report (<http://www.acelg.org.au/publications> or http://www.unisa.edu.au/Global/EASS/MnM/Publications/Local_Government_Programs_for_African_Muslim_Refugees.pdf) focused on the activities and programs of seven local government councils where a high percentage of African refugees had settled. A desktop review of key documentation and web source information was undertaken in the seven councils selected to examine initiatives and programs specifically developed for African refugees and those geared towards the refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in general. The scoping found that all seven councils were running and or sponsoring a number of programs specifically for refugees and newly arrived migrants, but there were no programs specifically orientated to the African refugee population. Most notably, the seven councils were active participants in the Refugee Welcome Zone, a key council initiative and made significant efforts to highlight the experiences of their refugee communities by undertaking and or supporting specific cultural and religious diversity events to be actively enjoyed by the whole community. The larger councils with substantial CALD populations were able to put in place a greater number of programs and events. The smaller councils tended to rely more on outside agencies to provide services. The report concluded that the challenges faced by African refugees are invariably complex and often beyond the capacity of local government to resolve. However, the scoping did find that councils are doing a crucial job in helping these communities find their way.

For most African refugees, settling down in Australia is difficult. Marlowe, et al. (2014: 2) conclude that African refugees often face discrimination and unemployment:

Many complex challenges, including the ways in which their lives are impacted by intercultural, economic and professional misunderstandings and sometimes-widespread lack of opportunity. Some would argue that they also regularly confront systemic and institutional racism that is expressed through the media and other mechanisms of mass communication and representation.

Besides having experienced the loss of family members, years of war and attendant brutality and then extremely harsh living conditions in refugee camps, many African refugees have minimal formal education and literacy and poor or no English language skills (AMES, 2015; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010; Dandy, 2009; Kabir, 2014; Spinks, 2009). In combination these features make the obtaining of employment, a crucial prerequisite for being able to settle, very difficult.

This Report has three central aims. A primary aim is to outline the challenges facing African refugees. A second aim is to examine what services are being offered by local government and NGOs and a third aim is to assess what the gaps are.

2. Methodology

This report presents the findings of in-depth semi-structured interviews with people working with refugees and refugees themselves. Five of the people interviewed are employed to assist refugees. Two of the five, Aamir and Alya, had come to Australia as refugees and had been active in refugee issues before being employed as full-time workers.

Six interviews were conducted with African people who were active in their communities. The community members interviewed had been in Australia for varying periods and had come to Australia as refugees. Interviewees came from New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. Table 1 provides the location of participants and their role.

TABLE 1: THE LOCATION AND ROLE OF INTERVIEWEES

Pseudonym	Location
Alya, Settlement worker	Suburban Queensland
Aamir, Multicultural community worker	Suburban Melbourne
Peter, Multicultural Officer NGO	Regional Queensland
Gemma, Multicultural Community Worker	Regional Queensland
Amalia, Community Development Worker	Suburban Sydney
Beza, Community Member	Suburban Sydney
Sandra, Community Member	Suburban Sydney
Salieu, Community Member	Suburban Sydney
Dawit, Community Member	Suburban Sydney
Aaisha, Community Member	Suburban Sydney
Asmara, Community Member	Suburban Sydney

The interviews covered the following themes:

- > The key issues African communities face in their local government area.
- > The services provided by local government and NGOs.

- > An assessment of the understanding local government officials have as to the requirements of the African community in the area.
- > The key interventions local government should be thinking about in regards to improving the quality of life of African refugees in their jurisdiction.

All of the interviews were telephone interviews. Most of the interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling. This sampling method is especially appropriate when research is concerned with a small population (Patton, 2002). Participants were asked to provide the researchers with at least one other person that could be contacted as a potential participant in the study. Alternatively, they were asked what organisation may be useful to contact.

3. Challenges African Refugees Face Settling in Australia

3.1 The burden of the past

All of the interviewees emphasised that most African refugees required extensive support, had a range of needs and that feeling settled often took many years. Aamir, who came to Australia from the Sudan in 2003 and now works for an NGO that assists African refugees, commented on the complex challenges and lack of support:

In my work within this community we found that there is a lack of services. The people who came here ... particularly from Sudan or wherever, they came here as displaced people or as the people that experienced violence in the war something like that. When they came to the new country [they think] ... that they're going to find a lot of services ... but I think that it is not the reality ... The process of integration into the community is not easy and it takes time.

Gemma stressed the importance of doing things well in the initial stages of settling African Muslim refugees:

For the African Muslim community the needs are quite high ... I think the settlement program's got to be done well for them to be successful ... The needs are many but if the settlement program is not done properly at the time of arrival that is the biggest problem that I think my team and I face because we have to undo what bad habits have been taught and that's very difficult ... It is a problem that I've seen for a long time.

Aaisha had come to Australia from Somalia. She emphasised the brutal contexts and trauma that many of the young African refugees had endured.

Yeah, I want to tell you ... The African kids ... they are young and they got the hunger and the war without mama without dad or something happened bad in front of them. It's happened many things. And I wish the ... African community ... would give the government the chance to freshen minds because they're young and they have many problems. Sometime when I saw them [young African refugees] ... they don't understand to tell you, to visit you or say hello or to shake your hand because they are scared. They will jump when you touch them and say hello.

A community settlement officer in Brisbane also emphasised the enormity of the trauma that many of the refugees have experienced:

The new arrival students ... they have lots of issues because they come from, yeah some of them come on boat and others come from refugee camp and they are exposed to all this stuff, social trauma ... (Alya)

3.2 Housing

Access to adequate and affordable housing was identified by interviewees as a major challenge for African refugees. Dawit arrived in Australia from Ethiopia on the Humanitarian Program in late 2014 and settled in suburban Sydney. He outlined his difficulties in securing housing.

Yeah, housing was a problem. I thought I'll share with my friend. ... but he failed to provide me with his details and documents to apply for the house together and I decided to get single accommodation like a studio. Then the price was expensive for me and I couldn't afford to live by myself ... and then I tried to look for share accommodation but the person who was supposed to get for me the house they didn't make it. So then I found accommodation by myself and then yeah, I paid for the bond. I thought I'll get it [money] from Housing for the bond and two weeks rent but it was complicated ... So they couldn't help and then I paid the money by myself you know and then the rent too. I feel very stressed you know.

Sandra came to Australia from Liberia in 2007. She also spoke about the challenge of finding affordable and adequate housing. Housing was a particularly significant issue for her as she had a large family:

It is very difficult. I've been looking for a house since last year and I have six children in a two bedroom house and the landlord doesn't know that I have all these kids so that's why I'm really scared. Just two days ago the landlord called me and asked me if I have a lot of kids in the house because someone I think told him about it and I have to lie about it.

Her local council had not been able to help her:

Yeah, the council they sent me to the Housing Department to help me find a place and when I put in the application form ... they [the Department of Housing] keep saying that because I can afford my rent so they cannot do anything. I have to keep looking for private [rental] houses. And I keep looking for it. I'm 27 now and I have six kids so they [real estate agents and landlords] ... think that I'm not responsible enough to look after a house. I'm not getting much help, so that's the problem.

She did recognise that the council's multicultural officer did all she could to assist her: 'Yeah, the multicultural [officer] ... she's trying her best but you know the process'.

Aaisha was also living in suburban Sydney. She had tried to get housing from her local council but despite her serious health problems they were not able to assist:

I have had two operations and a bad hip and I will this month have an operation for my kidneys and I don't have the house [social housing] till now. I take the Centrelink money pay every week \$310 for the apartment I'm living in and I have someone living with me ... Sometimes I can't sleep because I don't have enough to pay [bills]. I go to the cash shop to take money to borrow and to pay for my electricity or my pills.

The inability to access affordable housing is a central issue when a person is involved in an abusive relationship. Research indicates that domestic violence is a major issue in African refugee communities in Australia (see Fisher 2013; Ogunsiji et al. 2011; Zannettino, 2012). Although cultural factors play a major role in the failure of African refugees to report domestic violence there was also a fear by the women concerned that if they left the family home they would have nowhere to go (Zannettino, 2015).

3.3 Employment and lack of education / skills

All the interviewees recognised that employment and lack of education were major issues. Peter, who works for an NGO that assists African refugees in regional Queensland, commented

that the lack of formal education and English skills combined with all the pressures linked to moving to a new country, were major barriers:

The issue are really first of all literacy and numeracy and language skills to find employment. That's number one ... especially among the older family members. The younger ones can come in at primary school level, younger members of the family or into high school and stand a chance but for the older family members it is very difficult ...

At the time of the interview, Beza, a refugee from Ethiopia, had been in Australia for five years and her access to the support provided under the Humanitarian Support Service (HSS)² program was about to come to an end. Finding employment had been extremely difficult. She felt that small businesses may be a solution but that more support was required to help young African refugees set up businesses:

Some want to open a business like African or Ethiopian restaurant but we just couldn't without support. I would like some committee to help us to open businesses you know... We need to help to ask those committees on how to establish a business ... The community like they're not doing anything like young people they want to do something like more work ... They have a good idea you know. They can't do anything. They can't find support but if they get support they will do some ... business.

Sandra was unemployed. Originally from Ghana, she had been in Australia for eight years. Like Beza, she felt that finding employment was a huge challenge for the African community due to a lack of skills and discrimination:

It is very hard to get a job because first of all you are different, different country and we have an accent so yeah, getting a job, is really difficult because of our accents and where we came from. Some of us don't speak English well. Some don't write English. Even if you can speak English sometimes you don't write it so that's some of the problem that is in the community.

When asked what would help African refugees, she emphasised a stronger role for government and more flexibility in regards to recognition of qualifications:

Yeah. If the government can help the Africans to help them to be educated to be able to get a job so that's the main thing. Now the government says everyone has to work but they forget that not everyone is born in this country ... Cos some people they don't read and write, they don't read English, but others were doctors in their country and when they came here they are not doing the same job.

Salieu, an African refugee originally from Sierra Leone, had been in Australia since 2012. At the time of the interview she was living in an outer Sydney suburb. She also stressed that employment was a major issue:

It is a big challenge, a huge challenge. So many people that you know they want to work. Like I've got a few relatives in their 50s but because of their age it is a quite difficult for them to speak the language and it is not like they don't want to work they do want to work, but they can't work because of the language barrier. And no one will give you a

² Humanitarian Support Service refer to: <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/settlement-and-multicultural-affairs/programs-policy/settlement-services/humanitarian-settlement-services-hss>

job now if you haven't got like a certificate like say for nursing you know you can't get a job before when we came you could get a job without a certificate in nursing but now it is impossible. You have to go and do the course and it is very challenging especially for people who have never gone to school.

The complexity of people's experiences was highlighted by Aaisha. She had serious health problems and was unable to do any work that required physical labour. This led to her being retrenched. Subsequently she has not been able to find suitable alternative employment:

I had a job at Nandos. I worked three months there but I can't do that now after the operation. They told me to clean. You have to bend and I can't do that. I told them, 'I have [had an] operation. I can't do that'. I call my case manager and he said, 'No you can't work there'. I go back to my case manager and he said, 'I will find you another job', and told me, 'I will call you'. No one called me. You don't believe me but when I'm going to the Centrelink now I feel ashamed cos I'm young (at the time of the interview Aaisha was 32).

Their lack of skills meant that the interviewees who did work were generally in hard, unskilled jobs. Dawit worked in construction:

If I was very lucky and I had everything I wanted for me I could have yeah I could have gone to school and then you know and then make myself professionally something but right now I just do a labouring job ... I'm working on a construction site I pour concrete ... I wake up at 5 and then I arrive here at 7. Fortunately I organise myself and then yeah pack my things and then come here, I get like train at 5.15, 5.30 I will arrive here at 7.

A young Sudanese interviewee, she had completed her HSC a year before the interview, was an exception. When asked whether it was easy to find a job, responded,

I think so because last when I was at school I got a job at Kmart. I worked there for three years and yeah I think they're just looking for like if you are available, not your culture or your background or anything. (Asmara)

Asmara had come to Australia when she was very young and had the requisite cultural capital to obtain a job. Her English was fluent and she was a competent student. She felt that although she was in a good position, many young Sudanese needed assistance to find employment and that the youth centres could play an important role:

I think some ... some Africans are finding it difficult. I think it is just due to their non-experience cos some of them didn't finish school. They go to youth centres a lot, yeah. Mainly, they just sit there for a while. They don't actually do a proper resume and find the proper job and [at] that youth centre they could have found help or got a qualification at TAFE or somewhere.

The lack of adequate support was also a significant concern for Aamir. He noted that without proper education and employment many young African people were turning to crime. He felt that the 500 hours of English tuition that was available for refugees was often not enough especially for those refugees who had had minimal or no formal schooling:

In terms of education you have to go to the school ... You haven't been to school one day and they give you 500 hours..., but I think it is not enough for them to be integrated. What is the result? The result is that a lot of young people they are now in gangs or something like that ...

Aamir's conclusion about young African refugees turning to crime is borne out by the statistics. In 2012, police statistic in Victoria showed that Sudanese and Somali-born refugees were about five times more likely to commit crimes than the wider community (Oakes, 2012).

3.4 Family dislocation

A number of the interviewees spoke about the difficulties African families had adjusting to life in Australia. Besides the cultural differences, the busyness of everyday life and the tensions associated with finding housing, employment and financial stress made everyday life difficult for African refugee families. A community worker expressed this in the following way:

The second thing would be I would say really dealing with, managing family life in Australia and that's sort of all encompassing. It's like you know how to deal with the school. How to deal with new laws ... How to deal with the health services. (Peter)

A common sentiment was that it was far more difficult for parents to control their children in the Australian context. Aamir felt that 'culture shock' and the authorities not working closely with the Sudanese community were to blame for Sudanese young people engaging in criminal activity:

Within my community, more people now they have been gaoled because here still according to my belief there was what you call cultural shock. What do I mean by cultural shock? We don't know what the meaning of drugs. You know what I mean. We don't know ... and when we came here with our kids, the kids here there is more freedom here in Australia. I mean the kids or the children can do what they want to do ... That is why the majority of our children now and that's a very important point, they have been gaoled because we are not able to control them ... If kids, if you want to do what you want to do you are free to do that but what's the result. The government or police... they suffer from what we raised before 10 years ago. We said, 'Look for the kids ... step by step [we have] to work together. You have to respect our culture then we can operate together'. But they said, 'No. You have to deal within our law here in Australia'. The result is unfortunately our kids, our children now are in gaol because of drugs, and because whatsoever.

Peter pointed to the pressures of tradition and work resulting in a lack of support for children:

For instance you know like women from African communities don't have the same traditional view about taking their sons to sporting fields and playing sports. They just wouldn't do that because of the gender considerations. So the notion that these kids are supported by their parents is quite different. They have to make their way with very little support. Their fathers are working you know shift work ...

The problem is accentuated when both parents are working. Salieu concluded that a lack of parental supervision had contributed to a high rate of teenage pregnancy in her community:

It is really difficult for family to look after their kids and go to work and the reason is that back home the father goes to work and the mom stays home and looks after the kids.

Like here it is not like that so the kids are taking advantage of that ... Cos one thing I've realised is that the teenage pregnancy is really high in our community. Yeah, it is really high and I think one of the reasons is because the parents are really struggling to adjust you know between work and family.

The impact of migration on African refugee women varied. They were less likely to work and isolation was a problem. A couple of the interviews suggested that domestic violence was an issue. When Asmara was asked what other programs should be introduced for the Sudanese community in her area she responded,

I don't know. Maybe how to deal with maybe if you have family problems. If you're experiencing abuse in your life, or yeah violence, sexual assault ... I think [access to] counselling would be a big help.

Gemma's organisation helped African refugee women connect and it also helped women who were victims of domestic violence:

Yeah, we organise morning tea with a group of ladies you know you just want to get together. Social aspects, English language. Problems with husbands, domestic violence or husbands have got one, or two, three wives whatever those sort of things ... We've been operating for 21 years. We have within the service psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers [we can access]. We also have Islamic women that we could get in touch with ...

3.5 The challenges posed by the bureaucracy and resultant isolation

The restrictions and bureaucracy of the Humanitarian visa program were significant sources of frustration for newly arrived African refugees. A key issue was the expense involved in bringing their spouses to Australia. Dawit expressed frustration at the rising cost of bringing his wife to Australia:

But when someone has a partner you know, what I'm saying it is, if it is a real relationship, the money they're raising for the visa at least in the humanitarian case should be fair you know. Like last year before December it (the visa) was around \$2,700 so in January they made it \$4,680 and now recently they raised it to \$6,680.

He was finding being alone in a new country extremely hard. The cost of bringing his wife to Australia from Ethiopia was an enormous burden.

For people like me who [are] ... new to the country it is not easy to get that money ... I'm still like saving like what I have to save for my lady back in Africa you know what I'm saying ... I have to save for that and then I have to take care of my life here you know. I stay around the home. I have nowhere else to go and that stresses me. At the moment I don't socialise much. I go to work. From work I'm home ... I try to meet people, but it's not easy you know...I'm a new arrival here. To have a friend you need time for activities. It can be sport. You know some social thing.

Aaisha felt that the Department of Immigration was not helpful and the African community needed more support in the area of visa options for family reunion:

Every time that I meet the Somalian and Africans everywhere they will talk about immigration [and] why they don't go to the immigration to try to bring the family here. The government don't make it accommodating for Africans.

4. Support Provided by Local Government

It was evident that the support provided by councils varied and the employed workers had different views. Alya felt that her organisation had a good working relationship with the two councils in her catchment area:

They give us all the support and the assistance in order to run our work. They are always willing and coming to us and assisting us in our work. They really are doing a good job.

She noted that elected councillors made an effort to support the Muslim community. After the local Mosque was firebombed, the councillors were very supportive:

We have a good relationship and they are visiting us here on a regular basis. And when all the issues happened [the attack on the mosque] last time they came to us. They visited us and they supported us and they ... came to our organisation and they told us all what's happening is just minority people doing that...and they talk to us and our staff ... Yes, we organised many meeting with people from the government and the police.

Peter was employed by a regional council that covered six local government areas and was involved in a range of activities supporting refugees:

Early intervention work - I do advocacy, I do workshops, I do training and I work right across all visa classes including humanitarian refugees. [I have] wide experience with African Australians ... I also publish the regional multicultural directory and I also do research and I also do reports and write training packages for migrants and refugees from family relationships work through to employment, small business, the whole range.

When asked if councillors were engaging with the African Muslim community in the area, Peter's response was unambiguous:

No. They haven't cut the cake that way. What they do is they see you know like Africa is a big place and there's many religions in many different sorts of communities within the region. They just see everybody, just in one box. So they haven't cut the cake that way.

The five community development and or settlement workers were asked if they were aware of any specific programs or services provided by councils that were directed specifically at African refugees. It would appear that there are not. Alya, originally from Sudan, said that the focus of local government was more on supporting all new arrivals rather than Africans specifically and that she often referred people back into the African community for community support:

I am a member in the Sudanese community. The African community also they assist, but usually I refer them to the local community service organisations for like housing, but sometimes we refer them to their own community ... Sometimes they need to engage with people from their own communities.

Amalia was unaware of any targeted programs:

[Programs] for African refugees? Not that I'm aware of. What I know is that they usually have community grants that everybody can apply for and ... that's one of the programs that I am aware of.

She encouraged African groups to apply for the funding but said that the grants were too small to make a substantial impact:

When it opens I usually would [circulate the] call because it is accessible to everyone anyway, but that's the only one that I am aware of that the community can access. Local government is providing it to the general community so everyone is welcome to apply for that. For those who are fortunate to get it I think it does actually help them achieve some of the things ... but the money is not that much.

She noted that part of the challenge for local government was the 'capacity' of council to support every community group. She voiced her disappointment that in 2015, for the first time, her community development organisation did not receive any funding support from the local council for refugee week events. She felt that the preoccupation with amalgamation and *Fit for the Future*³ was having a significant impact on the available funding. Amalia outlined her role as a community development worker in a large multicultural suburb of Sydney:

The role involves a lot of things ... I don't do any casework or case management. I do a lot of group workshops projects and events. I do a lot of partnerships with other organisations so my area focus is I'd say it is multicultural development. My target groups are people from culturally diverse backgrounds, in particular around newly arrived migrants.

Peter also commented that there were no council programs specifically for African refugees in the local government areas he covered:

They don't run any programs whatsoever for the African community ... What they've got is they've got a community development branch with three or four officers mainly focusing on broad events. They do have a multicultural officer there who works within council ... doing some cross-cultural training of new employees ... He [sic] would involve himself with say *Harmony Day* or with sort of a goodwill thing but no specific programs for African Australians whatsoever and they have no intention [of offering programs in the future]. It is not the sort of things councils do in Queensland very much.

When he was asked why this was the case considering the council area had a substantial African refugee population, he responded,

Well because first of all they're not really equipped to do it. They haven't got the trained staff to do that sort of work. You have to first of all be able to use interpreters. You have to be able to do case work and they wouldn't fund it ... In Queensland what happens is that councils rarely do direct delivery of programs for refugees.

Gemma also works in regional Queensland. She was involved in the establishment of a multicultural community centre in the early 1990s:

³ Fit for the Future is a NSW State reform initiative for local government. Refer to: <http://www.fitforthefuture.nsw.gov.au/>

We work with the multicultural community here with regards to settlement programs. [It] could be just [teaching] English, ... just looking for jobs, settling them into a house, getting a place to stay, a school, anything. All aspects of the settlement program ...

She was disappointed that the funding from the Local Area Multicultural Partnership Program (LAMP)⁴ for the multicultural officer was coming to an end and felt that support from council was limited:

I think they copy a lot of things that the community groups are doing, but then they're not doing it. They're getting the funding for it, but they're not actually implementing it.

Her organisation had a good working relationship with some elected council officials but there were also disagreements. She described a meeting with councillors where the organisation requested premises.

The last time we discussed anything with the local council was that we needed premises to run our organisation from and also we suggested that the multicultural officer should be working from the building ... They said that they didn't have the building and they also said to us that they didn't need an organisation like ours to be here in the locality because there's this organisation that's coming from Brisbane to do this [support work for refugees] once a week or once a fortnight or whatever...but you know those organisation are maybe only here one day a week.

Alya's organisation in Brisbane focuses on supporting refugees in their first five years in Australia. It does get some assistance from local government.

The office is about settlement ... We have clients from Iraq, from Afghanistan from Sudan from Serbia from Eritrea ... Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea. We are helping them ... to find housing. Also we're organising here information session at our place to help them [get information] ... about woman's health, about things like Centrelink, driving. We are helping them learn at their own pace bringing people to give them some information session and then we organise some free driving lessons for them. Also, helping them to have employment. Some of them are employed in our organisations here like in the kitchen and helping elderly people at home. We do case work with students in a school once a week. We see ... [to] their needs. Also, we are doing a homework club. We're providing tutors to help the new arrived students ...

She outlined how her organisation worked in partnership with a number of government organisations including local government to provide information for newly arrived refugees:

I'm working with Centrelink as well and the Department of Housing. ... We are organising information session on a regular basis and we bring people here and help our clients to give them information about all their needs ... And of course we are reporting to the Department of Social Service.

⁴ In Queensland, a partnership between the Queensland Government and local government saw the introduction of the LAMP where 13 council areas were funded under the initiative that commenced in 2012. Funding was provided to cover half the salary of a multicultural officer position with local government funding the other half. However, on 1 July 2015 the scheme was shelved.

5. The views of the refugees on local government

The refugees interviewed generally had little connection with their local council. They tended to be more connected with NGOs. Beza did not interact with her council. However, she was strongly connected to the organisation, Mission Australia,

They get you together. You play something like you know bowling or you learn some computer. They would teach you to get a driving licence. A lot of the time they been like helping you. They're good.

Salieu had been living in an inner city area in Sydney and had recently moved to a suburb in Sydney's outer ring that has a large ethnically diverse community. She felt that the inner-city Council was much more supportive of its African community than her present council and that this was due to the former being smaller:

They provided a hall for us to organise events for like free so it was a good thing for them to help us out. So we had a close connection with the inner city council and they did invite us to partake in events and included us in most of the brochures or ... their newsletter. They'll put our photos in the newsletters or in their flyers promoting Refugee Week. So yeah, we had a close relationship with the inner city council

In her present location in Sydney's outer suburbs she had had no contact with the council concerned:

...We've been in this suburban council location for three years but we're not invited to events or anything like that ... There are so many people here that they forget about the others.

She was concerned that the support provided for refugees by councils and NGOs was not adequate:

For my family we didn't experience [problems] cos my dad was fortunate to have a job and my mum also went to TAFE and did a course that helped her to get into like looking after the elderly in the nursing home. So yes, so for my family we were fortunate. But for other families it is very difficult for people to get a job you know ... Trying to learn the language and then trying to look for work it is very difficult ...

Aamir's area has a large Sudanese community. He felt that although the local council and councillors endeavoured to engage, the council had a minimal understanding of the background and experiences of the Sudanese refugee community and that this hampered their capacity to connect and work with the Sudanese residents. He felt that before the Sudanese community could engage with local government they had to be educated as to what local government is and what they can expect from local government:

And this I want to say a very important point here – for us as a community to participate in the local government we have little understanding what the laws are in the Local Government and there is not any consultation and there is no information to get my people to understand the laws and I think this is a very important point. They don't understand what the laws are ... They don't understand what's going on. They don't know and there is no program to empower them to pick up all these things.

There was some frustration with councils' tendency to lump African refugees together and view them as homogenous. Interviewees felt that council should pay closer attention to the differences:

Africa is a continent ... So you cannot say that because it is an African country that everybody is from the same country...They don't understand they just say, 'You know we can't do anything about it and dah, dah, dah'. That's it... they're saying everyone from Africa is the same but it is not [the case]. (Sandra)

6. What more should local government be doing?

Interviewees highlighted a number of areas where local government could increase their support.

6.1 Supplying of venues and paying for insurance

Supplying venues and paying for insurance for events were viewed as important supports that local government could provide:

Well one of the things that they [the local council] could help with which is not really available to us is a venue like a free venue for us to hold activities. And the other problem is insurance. The community don't have insurance. Like I said, there's not that much money that we have really as a community. (Amalia)

The cost of hiring venues was a major problem. It was felt that council could provide venues at a low rate:

Our group, we like to have cultural dancing ... We are trying to get together the people that are ... celebrating the New Year. That's what we're thinking ... The organisers, they're saying we're renting some hall but I don't know how we're going to make it. We're not getting some help in Sydney they're [the council] not like doing anything special for the community. They're not doing anything. (Beza)

Salieu suggested that local government could support initiatives and provide a space to bring African Muslim refugee women together:

Maybe bringing the women together. I think it could be beneficial for Muslim women to catch up with each other ... It would be really beneficial for Sierra Leonean women to have a group just themselves where they can have someone come in and teach them English, computing or teach them about Australia, like just educational programs.

6.2 Supporting African youth

Initiatives that supported African youth were highlighted as an area where councils could provide more assistance. Peter outlined why he thought African youths required specific focused attention from local councils:

So the notion that these kids you know are supported by their parents is [not correct] ... They have to make their own way you know with very little support. Their fathers are working, you know shift work. So they all seem to gather at the university playing fields. That's where they are but they're not really supported by any particular group. Even though there are publicised youth programs, you can wave a flag all you want to saying, 'Come this way', but they don't realise that these programs are for them because there's no pathway put in. There is no focused policy direction which says, 'We will involve young [African] youth leaders'. 'We will do mentoring'. We will do all of this sort of work you know to create a pathway for them to join in with the mainstream youth services.

He felt that it was very difficult to obtain assistance for programs helping African youth:

Now I've had a young group of African youth come to me. A football team and they had worn out all their sports clothes. They'd collected their own money - about \$300 or \$400.

They had their money in the hand but the bill for a new set of football clothes was say \$600 or \$700. They were willing and they were playing all across the region to wear the council colours but I got the brush-off from the council. I said, 'What are you doing for black youth?' They can't see a different referral pathway for this particular group. They can't program for it. They don't know how to program for it.

The issue of parents working and the children having no supervision was also highlighted by Salieu. She argued that more support was required to assist African youth:

I think well the problem facing families in my community is that it is difficult to juggle work and look after family. It is really difficult and so I think [an] after school program would be very useful for students. Maybe tutoring or sport activities. I think that would be very beneficial because you know like most times I'm in the suburban centre and you see these girls all over the place before and after school because their parents are at work and they don't go home straightway they're just there ... Yeah, just hanging around.

Supporting initiatives that improved employment possibilities was viewed as key. Salieu argued that more information sessions and mentoring programs were required and that young Africans need to be encouraged to obtain qualifications.

The priority I think is jobs. Maybe they could have programs that would lead the people to job opportunities. Because that's one of the things that is very difficult you know yeah. It is really difficult especially like people think, 'Oh you know young black people going to university and all that'. People will say to us, 'Why are you doing all this. You're black. You'll never work in an office. They don't employ black people in their offices'. So yeah, I think that's one of the big problems. That's why ... the unemployment rate is really high cos people are finding it really difficult to get into jobs. For those trying to acquire higher education, I think mentoring would be a very good thing. Yes, cos I know someone who just finished and he's still looking for work and he was saying to me the other day, 'You know I finished my degree and if I continue doing what I'm doing [looking for a job] people will ... make reference to such a person finished Uni and they haven't got a job so why should I bother going to Uni. So I think mentoring and also traineeships I think would be a very good thing.

Peter felt that the response of councils to large-scale unemployment among African refugees had not been adequate:

They (the councils) haven't really thought like that. They're more reactive you know and it is a sadness in a way. I've been known to make some sort of groundwork with the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry they've come along and talked to the African communities about you know small business a bit like that but there's no definite program and there's no policy framework behind it ...

6.3 Increase grant funding

The large number of African community organisations competing for a limited pot of local government funding was viewed as a problem:

I established for my community two organisations. When I was the chairperson of one I applied for one grant and the government offered me like \$3,000 and this was back in 2005 and then we make an application for a specific cultural event we applied for a local grant and they give us one time one like \$500 in I think 2007 ... The amount is very

small and didn't fit our needs. And this led me to the point that there are many African communities and there are many organisations. The government tries to divide this money within this community, however it is many communities. They compete ... That is not fair I think because some of them they didn't get it. (Aamir)

Gemma emphasised that one area that could support African women in particular is for local government to provide 'start-up' funding and mentoring programs to enable small enterprise development.

7. Conclusions

As is evident from the interviews, African refugees in Australia face a range of challenges. They invariably arrive traumatised, poorly educated, lacking in skills, poor and not able to speak English. The majority of interviewees felt that councils could increase their support for refugees but that resettlement providers were probably in a better position to provide support:

I truly don't believe that the council has the ability to support refugees who come from war torn countries. I don't think a refugee can come straight into a council building and say I need your assistance. I don't think psychologically that is a fair thing to ask of a refugee who comes from a war-torn country. (Gemma)

Governments and service providers need to be aware of the diversity of refugee needs (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2007). However, in almost all cases the three main requirements are affordable and adequate housing, employment and education. Flatau, *et al.* (2014) conclude that it usually takes between 10 to 15 years for refugees to be 'successfully' and 'fully' resettled and integrated into Australia. However, the supports that are provided to address the resettlement needs of newly-arrived humanitarian entrants are limited to five years. How much support settlement providers could offer was limited by the five-year timeframe in funding allocated for refugees. Alya felt that five years was not enough:

We are working with the new arrivals from the first five years and of course some of them are asking for [more] assistance but we can't because they have exceeded the limit ... But sometimes we are doing some further work like because we have lots of issues like ... the girl's left home, the boy left home ... and drugs probably and the girl's left home and got pregnant ... And sometimes people call me to help them to assist them and I'm just doing it on a voluntary basis because I am also a member of that community.

Aamir stressed that service providers need to recognise the complex challenges and the time that it takes for African refugees to integrate:

To be integrated into this society that means that you have to understand the language. ... The majority of the people who came here some of them they didn't go to the school ever ... I think specifically from an African point of view that 99% of the people that came here ... they experienced war, they experienced lack of education, they experienced economic [deprivation] ... It impacted them and they came here.

Many interviewees outlined the recurring complex challenges in a context where little support was available. Amalia suggested that more could be shared on the experiences of previous migrants to Australia:

The needs are different but generally the community I always say it would be really good to learn from the previous migrants ... that migrated years ago. Cos, if you look at it, it's same issues that keep coming up.

There was a view that councils could help build community capacity and facilitate the creation of links between African refugees:

Council could meet with community members and just enquire what are your needs. How could we help you? And I don't know if they've done that before. I

can't say but that would be helpful. Just for the acknowledgment you know. As a community worker I only engage with the council if there is something that we need to discuss with them or if we would like to invite them to come to an event or program. (Amalia)

Sandra was aware that her local government may not have enough funding to provide support: 'If they really get a lot of funding ... they're going to do more but they're not getting a lot of funding'. Providing long-term sustainable funding for multicultural officers within council was identified as a key issue. In Queensland the ending of the Local Area Multicultural Partnership Program (LAMP)⁵ was having a serious impact. This funding (13 councils were funded) covered half the salary of a multicultural officer position with local government funding the other half. However, on 1 July 2015 the scheme was shelved with the expectation that councils would continue to sustain the position. Already one council has scrapped the position and the situation of multicultural officers in the other councils affected is uncertain.

All the interviewees recognised that supporting African refugees was not seen as the 'core business' of councils. However interviewees noted that councils could undertake a community development approach for working with African refugees where they would be recognised as 'agents rather than subjects' (Muggah, 2005). Such an approach would encourage information sharing with African refugees, provide a meeting space for the community and support African youth via targeted initiatives. The potential role of local government as an enabler is all the more timely, as Australia commences the process of accepting 12,000 Syrian refugees under Australia's Humanitarian Program from December 2015. Learning from the experiences of African refugees will certainly assist in their settlement.

⁵ Local Area Multicultural Partnership Program (LAMP) refer to:
<https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/multicultural/programs-and-initiatives/local-area-multicultural-partnerships-lamp-program>

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