An investigation of the challenges facing African refugee communities in the Australian workforce: Findings from a qualitative study of Sudanese and Liberian refugees in South Australia

Paul Gal Atem, PhD Candidate
School of Natural and Built Environments
University of South Australia

Abstract

It appears that the culturally and linguistically diverse population within Australian society is experiencing difficulties in access to the workforce, especially the growing African community. This paper draws on data from a study designed to give a better understanding of the perceived barriers influencing Sudanese and Liberian refugees’ ability to access employment and associated services in South Australia. This research takes a qualitative approach as a useful approach in understanding the problem of employment among Africans. The research has identified low socio-economic status, educational standard, language issues, lack of recognition of qualifications and social capital as primary influencing factors effecting African capacity to enter the Australian workforce. The study participants consisted of eight Sudanese and Liberian refugees and seven advocacy community organization workers engaged in helping African refugees to find work. The participants were interviewed using semi-structured questions. Subjects arrived in Adelaide South Australia, most in the last ten years. These refugees are generally disadvantaged and often their life chances and choices are considerably restrained by current Australian workplace culture and expectations. This study attempts to add their voices to the debate about employment in Australia.

Keywords: Sudanese and Liberian refugees, Africans, employment, workforce, integration, South Australia
Introduction
Several decades of civil and political conflicts in some of the African countries have resulted in an increase in Sub-Saharan African migration to Australia. Migrants have arrived from Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, and West African nations, included Liberia and Sierra Leone (Regan and Hamilton, 2002). Recent migration intake has mainly focused on black Africans and the majority of the intake has come from Sudan, a country which has experienced a vicious and devastating civil war that lasted for over 21 years forcing a significant number of Sudanese to take refuge in Australia (Briant and Kennedy, 2004). This paper aims to report and discuss qualitative findings of Sudanese and Liberian refugees in South Australia in relation to their access to employment. The paper provides brief and substantive background information about African refugees in Australia which gives the reader some historical insights about the emerging African community in Australia. The paper is mainly concerned with the Sudanese and Liberian refugees’ access to employment in the state of South Australia as employment plays a fundamental role in these groups’ settlement and integration into the wider Australian society. This paper involves a review of relevant literature on recent empirical studies of the refugees’ employment and the factors affecting their employment and interviews with African migrants living in Adelaide, South Australia.

Background
The minimal literature on African experiences in Australia indicates that there is a lack of understanding of local work culture and employment discrimination. However, this paper acknowledges the progression of the literature through a period of roughly three to five years because the African community has increasingly expanded in recent years and their settlement problems now have attracted publication to cover more diverse fields of study, all of which address the challenges that face African refugees. Udo- Ekpo (1999:232-233) asserts issues in relation to unemployment and underemployment among the African migrants in Australia which he argued has led to personal and integration issues. It is important to consider other underpinning factors when examining refugees’ employment opportunities. For example Sheikh-Mohammed, MacIntyre, Wood, Leask and Isaacs (2006:594) acknowledged the impact of civil wars and associated factors such as dislocation, isolation, famine, war and overcrowding as having long lasting effects on refugees’
integration and adaptation into the wider Australian society. This analysis is relevant and central to African refugees’ previous life in refugee camps and current employment, social, economic and integration problems in Australia. The African community demonstrates willingness to take part in the workforce but they need to have work knowledge in Australia as Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock (2000:49) noted that those who are skilled and qualified are “caught in a trap of not being accepted for work because they do not have experience that is perceived as favourable, and unable to get experience because they cannot get a job”. This has resulted in the majority of African refugees being engaged in pockets of ‘niche’ jobs with low payments and lack of opportunities for promotion or salary increase (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2005; cited in Tilbury and Colic-Peisker, 2006).

The issues of employment currently facing Sudanese and Liberian refugees have an impact on their adjustment to Australian society. Access to employment is a crucial and effective way for the African community to integrate into Australian society as discussed in Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003). The problems contributing to lack of employment according to Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2007); Jupp, (1994); Humphreys and Hausfeld (1984), cited in Jupp, (1994), that were experienced by earlier migrant groups for instance, Middle Eastern, Asians, South Americans and Europeans, have changed direction as they have successfully integrated into Australian society. The most recently arrived African and Middle Eastern migrants, especially those most affected by racism in the workforce, are the black Africans, and this is due to their physical appearance and cultural backgrounds. However, given the fact that these ethnic communities have been in Australia for a longer period of time, they have individually and collectively acquired skills, knowledge and experience which lead to employment. This will take a great deal of preparation and time for African refugees to break these predicaments and integrate into wider society, as people who come to Australia on humanitarian grounds tend to have extra difficulty in finding work (Jupp, 2002, cited in Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2007). Hawa and Khadija (2000:17) note that “European and Asian people appear to have contacts and a history of employment in Australia and they are accorded more trust and acceptance”. These ethnic communities have formed organizations and infrastructure within their own communities that can be accessed to increase employment opportunities and create jobs themselves.
Wooden and Robertson (1989, cited in Jupp, 1994) supported this argument by stating that people from refugee backgrounds are often confronted by difficulties in the labour market which cannot be explained alone by poor English language skills, occupational skill deficiencies or the recentness of their arrival. Refugees face greater adjustment problems in settlement, possibly as a direct consequence of the traumatic events leading to their arrival. A document titled *Refugees and Employment the European Context* (1999:3) states that, “refugees as a group, perhaps more than others, suffer from excessive unemployment, inactivity, non-employment, disguised unemployment and under-employment”.

Kopecki-Pasic (Youth Conference Study, 2003:43) states that people from non-English speaking backgrounds require “additional help from education departments, the elimination of predetermined prejudices concerning their refugee background, encouragement to use employment services, equal opportunities and recognition of their abilities despite their imperfections in English language fluency”. She further stated that, “…my parents who are both highly educated, however, due to the language barrier were unable to find a suitable job or access training”. A similar perspective is also documented in a recent study titled Study of the Review of Settlement Services for Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants, (2003:11) which suggests that, “…new arrivals face considerable difficulty in obtaining employment, are dissatisfied with the assistance provided by current employment services”. The review also stresses that there is a valuable role for the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) to play, for example as a facilitator. The document suggests the department needs to acknowledge the predicaments faced by refugees in getting employment, such as language proficiency, lack of recognition of qualifications, lack of local work experience, lack of understanding about the Australian workplace environment, the absence of a network or contacts (DIMIA, 2003). Generally employers just would need people to work for them and that there the idea to understand individual’s background is unnecessary.

**Method**

The data used in this paper was collected through face-to-face interviews with fifteen participants. The sample consisted of eight African refugees and seven community workers. The African participants consisted of four males and four females from age
eighteen and over who were seeking employment. The African participants were formerly refugees from Sudan and Liberia who arrived in Adelaide, South Australia, in the decade between 1999 and 2009. There were four females and three males who participated from community organisations that were identified as providing employment services for Sudanese and Liberian refugees in Adelaide. The members of these organisations are involved in activities which aim to maximise the employability of refugees, such as mentoring, organising voluntary work and assisting with resume writing, referrals and training. The African participants were identified and accessed through community organisations as most of them use services provided by these community organisations. The participants were aged eighteen and over and were seeking full-time or part-time employment. The semi-structured interview consisted of open-ended questions to allow and encourage participants to talk about their experiences in relation to employment. The interviews were conducted in English. The length of interviews for both groups of participants was between 30-40 minutes each and the interviews were completed in six weeks.

**Results**

The present study found commonalities in the experiences of Sudanese and Liberian refugees in relation to settlement and issues surrounding employment in South Australia. It emerged in this study that Sudanese and Liberian refugees had lived in refugee camps in Africa for many years before coming to Australia and this has had some implications for their emotional and psychological well being which also contributed to settlement barriers. It is indicative that the new and emerging Sudanese and Liberian refugees are experiencing issues associated with limited employment opportunities in South Australia. The unemployment problem among the Sudanese and Liberian refugees is associated with several factors and according to a participant from a community organisation this includes “limited secondary schooling is a problem for some Sudanese and Liberian refugees, particularly where it impacts on their literacy and numeracy in unison” (Lisa). This participant went further to say that a minority among Sudanese and Liberian refugees seemed to have gained skills in Africa however, these skills are not recognised in Australia. Sudanese and Liberian refugees had decided to attend educational training with the aim to improve and advance the skills that will enable them individually to access employment. However, similar employment experiences among Sudanese and Liberian refugees have
occurred in other migrant communities. For instance, most migrants who have been living in Australia for over forty years were presented with employment and other settlement challenges. Jasmine, a participant from a community agency reports that many migrant communities such as Greeks and Italians had experienced similar unemployment issues that are now faced by Sudanese and Liberian refugees. Another participant suggested public awareness about the issues facing African refugees and she specifically suggested addressing these through workshops at public institutions such as schools, government departments and related organizations. However, the participant went on to say that,

...I think another thing for me that might worry an employer is that a lot of African people they meet are very tall and chairs don’t always accommodate them and body language and eye to eye contacts and smiling is very important and if you sort of slide down with your knees almost to your mouth and not looking...directly to the person” (Tina).

And the perception that if you walk you don’t walk quickly, you just walk slowly which is not really slowly but because you look tall and you look like you haven’t got energy.

Recognition of Sudanese and Liberian refugees’ overseas qualifications
During the interviews, the respondents repeatedly emphasised the significance of the recognition of overseas qualifications. It was indicative that often Sudanese and Liberian refugees arrive with higher education qualifications that are not recognised in Australia due to the perception that the African education system in not equivalent to the Australian system. However, having already achieved their qualifications and obtained practical experience in their field, many Africans see no point in going back to study (Christine). The issue of recognition of overseas qualifications faced by African people is not confined to them but is experienced by other refugees from different parts of the world. Other refugees have qualifications and are highly experienced but also still cannot find jobs in their field of expertise in Australia (Georgia). She went further to say that those who have not been to school are faced with significant challenges for example, poor literacy and numeracy skills, an inability to write applications, resumes, and not being able to fill out social security forms that
related to Job Search. There is a need for an effective system to evaluate all kinds of overseas qualifications that African people bring to this country (Emmanuel).

**Job placement and training for Sudanese and Liberian refugees**

Job placement and training emerged easily in the discussion as one of the key issues. For example, one participant states that

> Job placement and training would give Sudanese and Liberian refugees the potential to interact with people where they are able to use their experience and enhance their English language skills (Dorothy).

The purpose of this should not only be to discover if they are suitable for employment, but also to obtain relevant skills and work experience. The respondent highlighted another achievable benefit, stating that

> after job placement one would be able to obtain a written paper which one can use as a reference for future job applications (Dorothy).

The proposal of job placement was brought up as newly arrived Sudanese and Liberian refugees are not familiar with the functioning of the Australian labour market. This proposal was consistent among participants, both Sudanese and Liberian refugees and community agencies, that employment industries would need to increase employability among African community.

> I came to Adelaide 18 months ago…and I don't know how to find a job….it would be important for me to get information from organisations how I can get a job” (Peter).

Lee argues that

> employers have a wrong perception that we come from Africa where there are no factories, businesses or educational institutions and therefore we don’t know how to correctly operate machinery….

African people believe in the importance of adults working to support themselves and their families both in Australia and back in Africa. In Africa there is no welfare system that gives money to depend on like here in Australia.
I don’t want to rely on social security money…it is bad in my culture for a man to be provided with while is strong enough to work (Angelina).

Clearly, most Sudanese and Liberian refugees do not like to be welfare dependent due to their cultural upbringing and sense of purpose. However, a substantial proportion of African people still rely solely on social security benefits.

**Racial discrimination**
Rebecca stated that,

*I knew of an Indian person who, in desperation, adopted an English sounding name so he can be short-listed as an applicant. He had a call asked a few questions, but as soon as he spoke with his accent, he immediately knew that he would not be called for a job interview.*

The majority of participants indicated that African people are racially discriminated against because of their language difficulties, dress standards and physical appearance. Sudanese and Liberian refugees are frequently perceived as lacking job employment skills. The participants argued that discrimination, and being wrongly perceived as lacking experience are the biggest issues.

*The employers would need to consider the diversity in the South Australian community and be flexible in workforce that values everyone in the community”* (Catherine).

People who are of African descent continue to face substantial disadvantage in employment institutions, therefore, “*cultural awareness to address this issue is needed”* (O’Connor).

Discrimination relating to employment is a major issue for refugees from around the world. A young person from Iraq pointed out,

*I feel that people don’t want to employ me because I’m young and I’m a Muslim. I think they have all these ideas about who they think Muslims are, so none of them will employ me for a job, even though I have good references, and I’m a hard worker”*. 
Although discrimination is unlawful in Australia it appears that unspoken discrimination still occurs on the basis of race and language. The interviewee also suggested there is a lack of understanding of African cultures and values and that cultural awareness is needed. *Equality in Employment* (1984:32) states, “Ignoring differences and refusing to accommodate them is a denial of equal access and opportunity. Discrimination means identifying individuals and groups with certain characteristics and treating them less well than people or groups with conventionally valued characteristics” (Payne, 1997). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that all human beings, irrespective of race, creed or sex, have the right to pursue both their material well-being and their spiritual development in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity. Article 1 discusses that any distinction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin, which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation (Employment and Occupation Convention, 1958, cited in Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Study of Inquiry Into Complaints of Discrimination in Employment and Occupation*, 1996). Hawa and Khadija (2000:17) state that African people who dress in a particular way because of their tradition or religion find that they are discriminated against in employment. African people wearing traditional dress often draw comments such as, “Aren’t you hot wearing that head dress”.

**Conclusion**

One of the primary settlement issues for the emerging African refugee community as discussed in this paper is accessing suitable employment that would improve their quality of life in Australia. Increasingly, there is a need for awareness and understanding of the settlement problems facing African refugees in the wider Australian society. The aim of this paper was to report on the qualitative findings about recent employment challenges experienced by the most socially disadvantaged Sudanese and Liberian refugees in Australian society. The Sudanese and Liberian refugees and also organisations who participated in the interviews have inescapably ascertained and highlighted numerous factors which are concerned with forced migration, language issues, housing condition, access to childcare, lack of work experience in Australia, limited social and cultural capital and discrimination in the
employment system. These employment predicaments faced by Sudanese and Liberian refugees are different but similar to the employment needs of earlier refugees such as Greek, Italians and Vietnamese who migrated to Australia during the second half of the twentieth century. Although Sudanese and Liberian refugees are painfully experiencing employment problems, they are happy to establish a legitimate place in South Australian community.

The findings presented in this paper contribute to the existing Australian refugee literature as there is only limited knowledge about the factors affecting African refugees’ ability to access the workforce in Australia. This information is also useful for government departments and advocacy community agencies that are working on behalf of socially disadvantaged Sudanese and Liberian refugees. However, the limitation for this research was its small sample size and the short timeframe. That being the case, this paper recommends the need for further study with a larger population of African refugees with a longer timeframe to advance this opportunity in investigating in details the dimensions involved in unemployment among the African refugees.

References


