

Around 46 per cent of refugees will be coming from South Sudan

However the settlement experience of African refugees may be different from that of other refugees coming to Australia in past decades

Mariano Coello, Arna Rathgen, Marc Chaussivert, and Pearl Fenandes from STARTTS spoke to Olga Yoldi about their experience working with African refugees.

OY There have always been refugees in Africa, however the UN seems to be pressuring Western countries to take refugees from African refugee camps. Why now?

MC Because they are closing down some of the refugee camps. Some camps are in such terrible conditions that they cannot sustain people any longer. They were set up as temporary camps but most have been operating for too long.

MCh Many refugees haven't been able to move on, because of on going wars, or unsafe post conflict situations. Some refugees have been in camps for decades, and some non government organisations (NGOs) are now developing long term programs in some camps to give people the kinds of skills and resources that will be useful since they may be staying in these camps a long time. Nevertheless, there are many refugees who have ended up or will end up in Australia. These are refugees from Southern Sudan mainly but also from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

MC Yes, many people have never been able to go back to their countries and have spent such long periods of their lives in refugee camps that they have been institutionalised.

MCh I work with asylum seekers from Africa and they experience the same situation as other asylum seekers: insecurity because their situation is still to be resolved and their families are still in countries where there is repression and political violence. Some of them don't even know what is happening to their families so they are anxious. Because of ongoing conflict and insecurity, it is hard to have an effective process of tracing the whereabouts of their relatives. Then there are problems for asylum seekers in accessing services such as health care or accommodation.

OY It must be difficult for many people to adapt suddenly to a modern, technologically advanced, Western society after having spent decades in refugee camps.

AR Yes it is a difficult process. During the consultations refugees from Sudan said they were experiencing difficulties dealing with the Australian system, especially with the education system. STARTTS has done a lot of work with schools, including training because they are struggling and parents know little about the education system, or about the expectations the school has for students and parents. The thing is we are working with communities we don't know enough about and we need to continuously challenge the assumptions we have of them.

MC Africa is very diverse, so we are in fact working with diverse communities. Yes we need to be vigilant. We need to gain a good understanding of the background of people we assist, the conflicts they had to endure, the injustices they had suffered, the issues they face and the social and political context in which they have come from. Of course all this requires making an effort, in terms of updating our knowledge, but unless we put in place appropri-



Left to right Arna Rathgen, Mariano Coello and Michel Chaussivert

ate structures to assist people, they won't be able to integrate into the new society in a productive way.

The fact that they find this society alienating can create difficulties for adults and children. Just because children are younger and absorb information more quickly doesn't mean they don't experience difficulties. Because of discrimination and racism, there is a danger young people could end up in gangs. On the other hand, there is a discrepancy between what children are able to experience and what parents are able to understand of this society and in this society everything is quite different. Children adapt quicker because they go to school, they are pushed by their peers and have no choice but to adapt to a certain rhythm that adults don't experience. That creates clashes and difficulties.

I don't want to portray a negative picture but the dangers are there. The difference between this culture and theirs is great, so great that it can be alienating.

OY I guess the concept of settlement into a new country may need to be redefined. How are the service providers managing this?

AR Of course the services are trying to respond. There is a lot of interest in developing models that are effective for these communities, so that is positive. Many Sudanese women said they are struggling to manage their children because they cannot rely on their traditional structures and the extended family in Australia. There are support services available to families, but services must adapt to meet the needs of these refugees. We need to invest more time and energy to develop models that work and that are appropriate.

PF We know little about Africa. You can sense people want to know and the fear is that they may not get the information from the sources.

The composition of the family is different. Many families have taken children under their wing, parents, siblings, and all extended family.

There is a fear that many are coming. Many don't have skills and language; the chances of getting employment are slim. There is this expectation that education will be the way they will get their children out of the cycle of poverty. There is emphasis on getting children into good schools. Churches are trying to assist.

MCh Refugees may feel socially isolated. Some people may end up living in areas where there is no concentration of people from their specific community and this will contribute to stress, isolation and lack of support. This is particularly hard for people that come from small communities and service providers cannot do much to provide the cultural support they need.

MC Most people have escaped from civil wars. Civil wars tend to divide societies, not within the country itself but here in Australia as well. That creates difficulties to find support within their communities. We need to find out the characteristics of those communities so our interventions are meaningful, but it does require an effort.

Round table discussion

OY The case of Sudan is particularly complex; there are 65 different ethnic groups, an endless war, and a society that is fractured...

MC Yes, and we have to ensure we assist them appropriately. We also need to be open to new ways of assisting them. There is always a process of trial and error.

AR In the Early Intervention Program, we do a lot of work with other service providers. In the course of the consultations with community leaders they said they needed assistance with structures and accessing resources.

OY I guess the notion of counseling is a foreign concept to them.

MCh We get a variety of responses from people. Some people engage in counseling especially around problems related to loss and trauma. Other people may not necessarily need this straight away. We need to be creative, expand our understanding of the way we may conduct interventions, the way we engage with different communities.

MC There are all types of counseling. Counseling is just a technique to help people find the resources within, to make decisions about their lives and empower them, so that they are able to overcome internal and external obstacles. Maybe our interventions could be more practical, less exploratory.

MC Some people engage better with their community than others. Some may need to explore issues that are psychological; others need practical advice, or a better understanding of their situation.

We don't provide counseling we do other activities to reconnect people with their communities and established networks. We are a good point of contact. When we started working with African communities there was a particular family that had many kids. They used to come to STARTTS and spend hours doing different things, talking to different people, painting, drinking tea ... For some people all we can do is to create an environment where they can be accepted and feel comfortable.

MCh It is important to address people's needs at different levels. Different types of interventions may be appropriate at different times. Sometimes traditional services fail because they try to impose a model of what is appropriate assistance, instead of being open to what that person really needs.

MCh Youth camps have been successful. I have also been involved in running a support group with men who have produced lino-cut prints. They had a public exhibition, which gave them an opportunity to share their experiences with the broader community. That was cultural exchange, finding a space in the broader community.

OY In Africa people live inside communities and this society places a much greater emphasis on the individual, so it must be really difficult to adapt to it, particularly when in refugee camps they were always surrounded by people.

AR It is indeed and this is exacerbated by the fact that even though they are going through their own settlement processes, they propose (sponsor) other family members

to come to Australia. They find themselves not only dealing with their own stresses of settlement but also dealing with the stresses of someone else. This really makes it difficult for people to connect with one another in the community, but also the expectations placed on them to provide money to the relatives for the airfare and so on.

MCh I was at a forum recently and a young fellow from Sierra Leone started to talk to me about the impact on him of the fences around houses in Sydney keeping people apart. In Sierra Leone, he said, the neighbours are like your extended family. He was alone in Australia and had no contact with his community.

Some service providers may not be sensitive or sympathetic to the way refugees from Africa may want to live, so you have a family who is used to a certain way of living, they may come from a rural background and then when they apply for housing they are allocated a flat. So far, there hasn't been an attempt to think creatively about how we might provide housing or be in tune with people's needs.

AR We can do that with appropriate support.

MC The level of anxiety services are having about Africans in a sense is disempowering for communities.

MC The tendency is to be polite, careful, politically correct but out of genuine concern it is possible to become patronizing.

MCh We need to include ourselves in this – in any analysis of how service providers respond to the needs of refugees from Africa.

MC Yes we need to deal with our prejudices, racism, etc. Refugees have gone through a lot. A long history has shaped their lives. They have experienced colonialism, wars of liberation, civil wars. Africa has been colonised, exploited, raped and decimated.

MCh Alongside the colonial experience there have been other processes including Arabisation in countries like Sudan and Mauritania, tribal conflicts, and these are influenced by globalisation where western powers are vying for influence in Africa. All of these processes will influence attitudes and perceptions. In Australia many people are not familiar with this part of the world and react to Africa as an idea, not just a reality.

MC Africa is diverse, south, east, west; Africans are more interested in the community than in the individual, more in the spiritual than in material things.

There are many realities in Africa but it is portrayed in very negative terms: disease, famine, corruption. Africa is the destroyed continent.

MCh There is a book by Anne-Cecile Robert that has just been published that turns this idea on its head. Instead of seeing Africa in negative terms as a continent that has failed to be part of global capitalist growth, in constant need of aid, she argues that Africa in fact offers in its cultural heritage an alternative model for a more harmonious and balanced relationship between people and the environment. Without idealizing or underplaying the difficulties faced by Africa, she argues that what is perceived as the 'back-

wardness' of Africa is in fact an expression of a cultural resistance to a destructive economic model adopted by the West.

MC African history has been constructed by colonial powers. Africa did not exist as a continent. It is a construction of the West, the Africa that we know, and therefore it is quite daunting to get to know Africa.

MCh Even now there is a whole discipline called Post Colonialism and yet in the latest issue of the journal *Third Text* there is an article that points out that amongst those considered major seminal figures of this discipline there is not one person who is from the African continent.

MC Many African leaders such as Nasser, Jomo Kenyatta, Patricia Bouleber were killed or disappeared, except for Jomo Kenyatta.

MCh But even in the contemporary sense, we know so little, you look at the media and what coverage do you get? There is no in depth analysis.

MC Africa is portrayed, as a terminal patient in palliative care. There is no hope. We know of corruption, war, disease, famine, atrocities and tribal wars. As if the conflict between Palestine and Israel was not tribal, as if the current conflict in Iraq was not tribal. In Western societies there has always been this fear of being invaded, fear of the East, of the cold war, fear of communists, fear of blacks. Africa is that type of anachronistic, ancestral archetype that symbolises danger: the primitive, the savage, and the primal...

Africa is so diverse; there are so many people, so many cultures.

MCh These myths are a continuation of the kinds of myths that persisted at the time of slavery. The African-american author Toni Morrison looks at how the more inhuman feelings and desires that people have projected into black people, and thus became functional in justifying for things such as slavery, by blacks being seen as less than human. Perhaps today these sorts of unconscious processes influence the way the African continent is treated.

OY Slavery still occurs in Sudan and Mauritania but the West benefits from it. It is amazing that people could be treated so appallingly.

MC Just look at the way international aid is distributed. If you see how much is spent per day, per person in the post war reconstruction of the Balkans: US\$300 and how much is spent per person in Africa: \$8. It is crazy!

OY According to Robert Guest 600 million people in Sub Sahara Africa survive on 65 cents per day, one African in five lives in a country torn apart by war and 46 million Africans are dead or dying of aids.

MCh The entire budget to address aids in Africa is equivalent to the budget for running one regional hospital in a country like France.

MC Everyone knows that in the next few years millions will die from AIDS and malaria in Africa. They need urgent help. ■