



# It's not all Black and White: An African Story

Brisbane City Council, Brisbane, Queensland

*This project also relates to:*

## Education

Brisbane City Council developed an educational kit, *It's not all Black and White: An African Story*, featuring the lives of new and emerging African communities in Brisbane. The Council designed the kit to be used to educate the broader community about new and emerging African communities and reduce inaccurate preconceived racial stereotypes.

The broader Brisbane community welcomes people in a way that is different to the way African communities welcome people. These differences in culture lead to misunderstandings that prevent the two communities interacting well. The Council aimed to reduce negative reactions by enabling the broader community to understand these different norms and expectations, and cultivate ideas on how to build relationships across their communities.

The kit allows the broader Brisbane community to discover the reality that refugees are resilient, have a lot to offer and have come to Australia seeking a better life. Government departments, community organisations and schools can use the kit as an educational reference tool to build relationships, raise awareness and combat prejudice and racism.

Project partners included Anglicare Refugee and Migrant Services, Benarrawa Community Development Association, Acacia Ridge Community Centre, the Multicultural Development Association and the Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma. The Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship provided funding for the project through the *Living in Harmony* program.

### Identifying a need through community feedback

The Council was aware of some concerns in the local community about security and crime and realised that unfounded negative stereotyping

was occurring and community education was needed. The concerns were largely focused on African communities.

Brisbane City Council community development worker, Sumathy Selvamanickam, said:

Because African communities are more visible there is a more immediate reaction.

### Building on previous success

In response to increased racism in Brisbane following the September 2001 terror attacks in the United States, Brisbane City Council produced a booklet titled *Islam in Brisbane*. This resource was very useful in increasing community awareness and knowledge about the Muslim community. Based on its success a similar model was used for the *It's not all Black and White* project.

### Community consultation and engagement

Brisbane City Council worked closely with various African communities to produce a resource that would give a brief profile about their way of life. The Council consulted community leaders and established a project steering committee that included representatives from the Congolese, Rwandan, Ethiopian, Sudanese, Somali, Eritrean, Liberian and Sierra Leonean communities as well as representatives from the project's partner organisations. The African representatives were included to ensure that the kit was culturally appropriate and the community organisation representatives ensured that the project was relevant to the local area.

### Interviewing the community

The steering committee appointed a project coordinator and engaged six bilingual consultants to interview the Sudanese, Somali, Ethiopian, Liberian, Eritrean and Sierra Leonean communities and their community leaders. Draft country profiles were prepared based on the interviews, which were refined by the African members of the steering committee. The interviews were recorded and form part of a DVD included in the kit.

## Filming community events

A series of community-building events was arranged and filmed for the DVD. The bilingual consultants promoted the events to the African communities. The events included:

- a meeting between local residents from Annerley and newly arrived local residents from Sierra Leone, Liberia and Sudan at the Annerley Literacy Centre during which mini classes were held in African languages
- a *Getting to Know Brisbane* event held with newly arrived refugees living in Moorooka and African community associations and attended by a local Councillor Steve Griffiths from Brisbane City Council
- a free community fun day celebrating African and Australian cultures, in the grounds of Moorooka State School for Harmony Day 2006.

## The kit

The kit includes a booklet, a DVD and a series of community-building fact sheets that provide ideas and information on a range of activities.

The booklet begins by explaining some of the challenges faced by newly arrived African refugees in Brisbane such as:

- the effect of living in refugee camps for several years
- language barriers
- problems finding work
- the traumatic experiences many have undergone
- lack of familiarity with Australian society and Australian law.

Each subsequent page of the booklet is dedicated to a different community. Vivid images of each community involved in sporting and cultural events are included in the booklet.

The bilingual consultants, in consultation with each community, compiled the information about each culture and its values. The booklet examines issues such as family life, community and sport. The traditions and hopes of each community are explained. This allows the Brisbane community to see the refugees as ordinary human beings, just like them.

Cultural events and activities were recorded for the DVD included in the kit. Cultural practices such as eating customs, hospitality traditions and traditional dances were captured on the DVD, so that the broader community could appreciate the different cultural experiences that refugees bring to Australia.

The community-building fact sheets offer practical strategies and relevant contacts to successfully plan community events and promote cultural harmony in schools. The information in the fact sheets is designed to be used with all community groups, not just African communities. The fact sheets cover:

- holding a community event or celebration
- volunteer settlement support
- running language sharing groups
- discussing local issues through Community Conversations
- neighbourhood groups supporting new communities in local areas
- working with African community representatives
- promoting cultural harmony in schools.

## Launching and promoting the kit

The kit was launched by the Lord Mayor of Brisbane, Councillor Campbell Newman, on World Refugee Day on 20 June 2006.

The Council conducted ongoing promotion and distribution of the kit through extensive emailing to refugee support networks. The refugee communities and Council staff further facilitate promotion by word-of-mouth.

## Achievements

The kit has begun to forge links between the refugee and broader communities. Inspired by the kit, Moorooka State School hosted a cultural awareness day on Harmony Day 2007 that included performances by members of African communities. Community fact sheets from the kit have been consulted when organising events such as a picnic held on Australia Day with the broader Brisbane community.

The project's success with the refugee communities was clear from the start. They were very enthusiastic about having their countries portrayed in the kit.



photo > Zahara and Mulu performing the Eritrean coffee ceremony

Bilingual community leaders formed bridges between communities. Council project officer, Mandy Cox, said that working with the bilingual consultants had been extremely beneficial and they had been 'very good at adjusting our expectations to what was realistic'.

The kit has been widely promoted, and has been commended in other parts of Australia, such as Tamworth where it was used as an educational tool in leadership training for teachers. It has also been used in Toowoomba.

The resource kit is being widely used as an educational tool by voluntary groups, community organisations, schools and church groups to improve the broader community's understanding and awareness of African communities settling in Brisbane.

Education Queensland has used this excellent resource for their leadership training programs.

The Fire Rescue Service requested 250 copies of the booklet to use in its cross-cultural training to improve members' understanding of these new and emerging communities settling in Brisbane.

Other local and interstate councils have commended the Brisbane City Council on this publication as it has proven to be a tool for cultural awareness training as well. A Tamworth City Council employee commented:

I am really impressed with the all the information, and the presentation is fantastic! What a model to follow! I have passed some copies on to a councillor and also to the Sudanese leaders that came from Newcastle, Sydney and Armidale for the meeting to help in negotiations with our mayor and the council. They were also very impressed.

What started as the power of one has become a community movement with a very positive outcome.

The kit received the Lord Mayor's Award for Excellence in Social Justice in May 2007.

### Challenges

A major obstacle the Council encountered in producing the kit was the limited timeframe for its development. Many community members from different African cultural backgrounds who were interviewed could not be included as a result of financial constraints, and an intention to keep the booklet and DVD short to facilitate its use in schools.

The limited timeframe also meant that some important cultural aspects were left out, such as incorporating the perspectives of elderly people who have their own world view and find it harder to integrate into a different society.

### Key factors in the project's success

The involvement of communities made an enormous difference to the project's success. It was crucial that participants' voices be heard. Community members liked the idea that their culture and tradition would be presented in the kit and appreciated being consulted.

African communities in particular, are very much led by their leaders. Engaging those leaders was pivotal in successfully promoting the project in each community.

### Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

Consult with community leaders to facilitate a sense of ownership.

Be realistic and have a scope that is manageable.

### Contact details

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## Profile > Bobby

**Bobby** fled Liberia in 1990 and lived as a refugee in Guinea for 12 years before being resettled in Australia in 2003. He said:

Since then I have started to put my life back together. I can say I am comfortable living free in Australia and I can see a lot of progress and opportunities for the future.

He learnt about the project when he was consulted in his capacity as a community leader:

I could clearly identify that this project would not only benefit my community immensely, but would also increase awareness in the broader community about the new and emerging Liberian community that I am leading. It was a very great opportunity.

As a leader of his community, Bobby represents and advocates for them. He was able to provide cultural information to the project officer and link the bilingual consultant to other members of the community who had knowledge to share.

Bobby appreciated the way the project allowed the community to promote its culture, and to explain culturally sensitive information. He felt that many Australians were afraid of the unknown and had not been very open towards embracing Africans within their neighbourhood. This project allowed them to get to know each other better and taught the broader community how to engage with the African communities.

Bobby reports positive effects such as children being treated better at school. He says that he can see a change of attitude in the children brought about by the project.

The project, especially the DVD, has increased awareness about African communities. Bobby said:

Before the DVD, all Africans were just seen as one. Now people know something about the differences between people from various African countries.



## Profile > Rossmond

**Rossmond** is from Sierra Leone and arrived in Australia in 2004. He lived in a refugee camp in Ghana for five years and now lives a happy and promising life in Brisbane. Rossmond has two children, one born in Ghana, one born in Australia.

What he likes most about life in Australia is the peace and freedom. He said:

You have time to reflect and be incorporated into the society. There are not many barriers. That's the best thing about Australia.

The project interested him because it benefited people in developing and integrating into the society. Rossmond was encouraged to tell stories about his culture and traditions. He was involved in various activities, organised meetings, gained further knowledge about his own culture, and met other community members.

Rossmond recommends other refugees be involved in a similar project to get a more rounded view of their culture, and because it allows a more open portrayal of the community.

photo > Rossmond, from Sierra Leone