NEEDS AND CONCERNS OF AFRICAN REFUGEE YOUTH IN MELBOURNE: ANECDOTAL IMPRESSIONS.

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Introduction and Overview

Settlement of people from Africa in Australia has been increasing since the end of the 80s through the Refugee and Humanitarian programs (Settlers Report 1995-96). Despite low numbers of African immigrants compared to others, they face enormous amount of settlement, integrational and self-development problems. Therefore, purpose of this paper is to call upon the concerned and well-wishers to search for solutions towards alleviation of some of the problems. Members of the African Studies Association of Australia and Pacific should focus in different areas of the difficulties in search for solutions as causes may be rooted in various facets of problems.

Views expressed in this paper are mainly an outcome of discussions and interactions held with various Africans in Melbourne. This has occured mainly as a result of our leadership of the Eastern and Central Africa Communities of Victoria (Incorporated) (EACACOV). These views have been gathered while attempting to set up various organs (portfolios) that would focus on the various concerns and needs of the EACACOV members.

Eastern and Central Africa Communities of Victoria was formed on the 10th January 1998. The objective of the association is to be a forum from which persons (as members) would promote, address, and deal with matters of mutual interests and concerns. Membership is largely drawn from persons who live in Victoria but originally came or trace their ancestry to the following countries: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania Seychelles, Mauritius, Mozambique, Malawi, Rwanda, Burundi, The Republic of Congo, Horn of Africa, Madagascar, Comoro Islands, and other Eastern and Central African Countries.

It has been claimed that relative to the total number of black Africans in Melbourne, a high proportion of them have gone through mental institutions. We have had two suicides and three attempted suicides due to depression. There is also relatively rapid growth in the involvement of drug taking and trafficking by the black Africans mainly youth [anecdotal stories from Darebin African Resource Centre of Victoria (DARC) who claim to be dealing with some of the problems and their outcomes]. We have heard stories about fairly high levels of growing miseries in individual relationships with some family breakages. Many Africans in Melbourne face multiple problems, many of which are beyond the capacity of the association. Although the Federal

Government has been encouraging persons from the same background to settle together in an area for various objectives including self-help, in regard to some respects of Africans in these high concetrations like Flemington, such a practice has sponsored certain negative stances. For the purpose of this paper "Youth" implies ages from 12 to 25 years.

About the Africans in Victoria

Statistically, Victoria holds over 10,000 Africans without putting into account those from North Africa namely Egyptians, Libyans, and others, i.e Africa South of Sahara (A draft copy of a study not yet released by LaTrobe University for The Bureau of Immigration research has these figures; Batrouney, T., 1991:19-51). A huge percentage of the black Africans who have migrated to Australia since 1981; having arrived through refugee\humanitarian programmes (Okai, 1995:2). Implicationally, this means that the concerns Africans do attach to any inadquacies in the support to refugees, arise from the heart of most of them. Eyin, (1994:2) quoting the State of the Nation, (1993) submitted that refugees from Africa constituted an average of 7% of the total Australian refugees' intake for the years 1991-93 and these mainly came from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Uganda. Other parts of Africa like the Sudan, Kenya, Zimbambwe and Botwana later added to the thrust. About 57% of these settled in Victoria (Melbourne)(Settlers Arrival, 1995-96). Andy and Ward, (1997:13-14) show a sample of youth refugee arrivals in Australia. Africans are among the top five of the incoming numbers. For example, between May 1996 and May 1998, Melbourne received the following young refugees between ages 14-25 years; from Child 1-3, Ethiopia 40-50, Eriteria 30-40, Somalia 130-140, Ghana 1-3, and Sudan 20-30. These figures may not be totally accurate because of the nature of their recording\data collection. For example, if an Ethiopian was born in a refugee camp in Sudan, he or she may be put down as a Sudanese person in the immigration records rather than the correct country of origin which is Ethiopia

Why Do we Draw Our Focus on African Refugee Youth?

In spite of the issues and problems heard covering all ages of the African migrants in Melbourne, we have chosen to focus on the refugee youth because they are the most vulnerable. After all, migration to Australia through Refugee\Humaniterian programmes means having been subjected to an age test, thus the African refugees have been generally young persons (Batrouney, 1991; Moss,1993). Young persons are the ones picked to come and contribute to Australian development . We presume that if consciousness about Africans' issues are raised in the minds of our youth, perhaps attempts will be made in future to change part of the constructed images about black Africans. Also, personal transformation is easier to achieve while young and growing than after maturity [see the theoretical aspects in this paper].

In regard to "Refugee Youth", their needs and concerns appear to include: model of migration and the outcomes from the original country and transition, settlement and integration, culture/values, poverty/employment, health, family structure, language barriers, educational and school expectations and breaks. Genealogy (ancestry and extented family) and relevant cultural networks play a critical role in the development of individual and family values in Africa. Suggestions have been made about revisiting the wisdom of the system in an attempt to search for ways how to deal with youth issues. This paper cites a few areas in order to show the extent of the needs and concerns as respective from the highlights of the discussions.

Okai, (1995) in the study of the role of ethnic community organisations in promoting social integration of African immigrants in Australia has in part shown some of the issues. He attributed the problems partly to lack of understanding the Africans' background, lack of institutional structures, and collective resources and basing settlement issues on collective self-help. Basing on our anecdotal impressions, we wish to add the following to his list: value conflict (i.e sandwiching of values) by mainly the incoming individuals, stereo-typing[1], individual defeatist attitude, education and training path accorded to the in-coming maturing young people, peer pressure and media, especially TV and radio programmes. However, we would like to emphasise

that more in depth studies are needed in order to articulate on the issues and initiate appropriate programmes and policy basis. Areas for examination may include: the refugee path to Australia, settlement and integration issues, education and training path and setting possibilities for refugee youth development initiatives.

We also wish to point out that the issues concerning African Refugee Youth could apply to all categories of refugees who have settled in Australia. African refugee groups being among the recent arrivals of the immigrants to Australia, they provide premises for the understanding of some of the current settlement issues in Australia (Settler Arrivals 1995-96 Statistical Report No.22).

Some of the issues and difficulties mentioned in the discussions under EACACOV highlight a strong need to phenomenologically and systematically study of the needs and concerns of Africans in Victoria. The studies should be categorised on certain key criteria. For example, focus may include: youth, gender, family issues and to an extent specific regional focus as Africans are not an homogeneous group, if compared to Italians, Greeks, and Chinese. Some of the issues that impact on the living in Victoria have their bearing to the areas of origin. For example, studying peoples' basic cultures, religions, values and social transitions in the home countries and relating the findings to the Australian environment may provide some explanation to the ways of addressing the needs and concerns of the settlers.

Impact from Home Country and Transit problems

Settlers Arrival 1995-96 shows that about 5500 black African Immigrants entered Australia in that period. The biggest thrusts came from South Africa, Ethiopia\Urethra, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Botswana, Ghana and Nigeria. In the recent years, these countries have been politically turbulent, one of the causes of refugee exodus (a Push Factor for migration, Todaro, 1989). Refugees leave their home at spur of moments, sometimes forcing rural community into urban

environment. Due to calamities that bring about the refugee scenarios, hardly any space is found for making travel arrangements. An individual's property is generally left behind, including certificates and travel documents. This is an out-right indication of poverty and difficulties there-on. This is what makes the refugee issues more pronounced than those of other migrants. Other factors that need to be looked into include the issues of growing up in refugee campus and what behaviour is required to survive there vis-a-vis living in Western societies. As conforming to behaviours as expected by the main stream society, they do have to deal with traumas of war, torture, rape, long spells in refugee camps, grieving of family members who may have been killed perhaps in-front of them, grieving for homeland, past home experiences, culture, and family(ies) left in the unknown and the idea that they many never see their countries again because they are in exile. In the settlements, they are confronted with the same issues as other categories of migrants, integration, language, obtaining the necessary items to use, un-employment and many times poverty (Stankovska, 1998).

How can these issues be addressed? Stankovska, (1998:16) has identified seven issues that need to be addressed in migrant settlement. These are : separation from family and the emotional and moral support provided; separation from community and familiar structures; different values; learning to communicate in English; and access to suitable accommodation and employment; access to social support and network and; and the reception by the host community.

Settlement/Integration (Location)

Goldlust, (p.59) notes that emphasis on rapid assimilation into the Australian community, by the official Government policy, enhanced cohorts of immigrants from the same country to form more concentrated settlements within inner city and suburban areas of the large cities. He added that the concentration were later accompanied by the emergence of social, cultural, religious and welfare based organisations serving the various needs of local groups who share a common background and language, and face considerable adjustments and settlement problems. The similar benefits may not have been extended to African immigrants in their growing concentrations

because of being non-homogeneous groups (Bureau of Immigration and Population Research, 1994:xvi-xvii). Recently, attempts have been made to relocate these African concentrations to the newly developing suburbs of Melbourne. For example, removing them from Kensington to Melton. In this regard, lack of job opportunities, difficulties in public transport and poverty does compound the un-employment situation leading to other problems. These Africans may find it hard to create employment opportunities there due to lack of the resources. As youths generally live with their parents, the said relocation would as affect them.

Issues Specifically Facing African Youth

African youth face all the issues that are encountered by other young migrants. In addition, they face a serious issue of identity . Do they identify with the Africa that they see portrayed on TV as a basket case or do they identify with glorified African American sportsmen and show business stars?

Unlike European migrants, the Africans and Asians will always stand out by virtue of their racial characteristics, no matter how long they have lived here - even if they speak with an Australian accent or change their names. Whether the African migrant youth resent this or accept it with pride is the challenge they and their parents face. Acceptance by the host community of unity in diversity can be of great help to their settlement. Pauline Hanson's ant-migrant demagoguery can only be alarming to the African youth even though she mainly attacks Asian.

While other migrants have some symbolic unifying factors (eg. Chinese Lunar year) the Africans are yet to identify such symbols. Diversity of the African community often means many languages and cultures. It is hard for African community workers to master these languages and cultures. It is also easy to lose these African cultures and languages for the main stream ones. EACACOV has a programme of preserving and promoting the African languages and cultures. It has also a task of fighting the negative representation of Africa and Africans in the media and promoting an authentic picture.

Language Barriers, Educational and School Expectations and Breaks in Transition

Young people settle in Australia with the aim of continuing with their schooling to move onto further education, vocational, training and employment. These hopes may easily get changed as a result of what goes on in school. Sometimes, breaks in transition brings out a mis-match and it takes one sometime to relocate well in the Australian system.

Depending on age, all migrants are entitled to English provision, they are unlikely to acquire sufficient English in the periods allocated. Also, using ones age to determine which grade to join demotivate migrants who may not cope with the material of the chosen year. Peer pressure and matters of self-esteem influence hating school mainly by those in ages 14+. They drop out of school as soon they attain the required age. For those who would be entitled to "ESL" in secondary schools, we know that budget constraints are seeing these marginalised programs out of the curriculum in some schools. Mainly due to poverty and difficulties of reaching the facilities some youth do not complete their home work. For example, access to computers. Single parents especially women from the Horn of Africa have difficulties themselves with English. Basing on reasons similar to the foregoing ones youth from such backgrounds hardly fulfilled school expectations.

For the youth who may like to identify with American sports and dance stars, they do use the power of TV picture in learning English. Then, they will start imitating the American not Australian accent.

To summarise some of the key needs and concerns of the refugee youth:

- Lack of identity and difficulties of constructing a reference one as some youth have no parents, or do not want to identify with the parents, may be because of diversity in the value system or a generation gap,
- Lack of recreation facilities and place of getting together,

- Certain Health issues to some of those from refugee camp,
- Sometimes having behavioural problems, perhaps due lack of parental guidance due to cross-cultural issues (parent see society as a wide place that require restriction, the kids see control as a model of curtailing their freedom
- Television and peers' social pressures is the source of reference instead of the parents'/family values,
- Also, some parents are struggling to relocate themselves within the Australian social and cultural setting of multi-culturism. This means that the parents are also struggling find indentiy given where such an individual comes from. Therefore guiding youth is another big task to such a parent.

Theoretical Aspects on Tapping Into People for Change

It is important that any form of study to be carried out would need targeting\capture or try to understand the youths' perspectives especially to know what makes them do what they do. Thomas (1966), argues that the situation in which an individual finds him/herself contains a configuration of factors conditioning the person's behaviour and characteristics. Behaviour can be reflexive (inborn trait of an involuntary response to a stimuli) or voluntarily learnt actions. The latter is dominant in peoples learning in forming behaviour, attitudes and values (in managing change). Skinner (1971), observes that behaviour is more determined from without (learnt) rather than within (reflexive or unlearnt). By creating pleasing consequences to follow specific forms of actions, the frequency of certain behaviour increases while the inverse offers opposite results. Therefore, the tendency to repeat or not to such behaviour, is influenced as a result of the reinforcement or lack of it. Positive reinforcement strengthens and increases the likelihood of repeating the wanted behaviour, while negative/lack of reinforcement is likely to produce less of the unwanted behaviour (Robbins, *et al.* 1996:130-35). Skinner (1971), further argues that systematically reinforcing each successive step (a type of conditioning to voluntary desired or learnt behaviour, leads to a reward or it prevents a punishment), such moves an individual closer

to the desired response (Operant Conditioning). Observations and experience provide similar response. Implicationally, a preliminary attempt in phenomenologically understanding needs and concerns of the refugee youth enhances development of policies through which the issues may be tackled. Stankovska, (1998:16) has noted that migration can impact on family and social dynamics. The boundaries get confused and the result is:

> *Inter-generational conflicts also frequently arise as a result of children adopting the values of the host society so that there is less respect for, or an abandonment o f the traditional ways of leaving.*

Conclusion

As Africans are a marginal group in Australia and one of the most recent arrivals when compared to other ethnic minorities, it is important that we our ethnic communities with all forms of help possible to try deal with problems facing us. Although Governments share the first responsibility, given the size of our numbers, stereo-typing society feeling society has toward new arrivals, questions of resources and many other factors, we may inevitably resort to self- help and voluntary models of solution search.

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1. Views like, "One can take an African out of the bush but he/she cannot take the bush out of an African" do pun in contrast. For example, this statement implies that an African maintains his\her culture and values. In contrast, it may mean that an African resists all forms changes, thus not open to learning