

Matthew Albert

Australian Refugee Policy from an African Perspective

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In 1999, when aged 20, Matthew Albert co-founded the Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning (SAIL) Program which now engages almost 300 volunteers weekly at three campuses across Melbourne. The SAIL Program supports the fastest growing ethnic community in Victoria, the Sudanese refugee community, by providing free services including tutoring, home help, camps and excursions to about 450 people every week. Matthew remains the overseeing coordinator of the Program. Matthew is also the Founding Director of the Sudanese Online Research Association; an online advocacy centre for the global Sudanese Diaspora. He is regularly published on issues concerning refugees, migration policy and African affairs including in the Melbourne Age and Eureka Street. In 2004, Matthew worked for the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees in Nairobi, Kenya and at the Kakuma Refugee camp. Matthew is a solicitor in the Victorian Government Solicitors' Office and is a research assistant to the Solicitor General for Victoria in her role as legal adviser to the Victorian Human Rights Consultative Committee. Matthew has been appointed Australia's representative to the Commonwealth Secretariat until 2007. In this capacity, Matthew sits on an Advisory Board that determines development aid funding for youth in the Pacific Region. Matthew has been asked to lead the charge towards a Regional Child Rights document.

Abstract

Matthew's presentation looks at the Australian refugee scene from a bifocal East African perspective. Firstly, he reviews an international perspective of the Australian policy as it influences the lives of refugees in Kenya. Secondly, Matthew will reflect on the domestic impact of the policy as it has effected Australia's fastest growing ethnic community, the Sudanese refugees.

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Australian Refugee Policy from an African Perspective*

I would like to start by thanking you for the invitation to join you at this important conference - an important conference partially because of the subject matter, but also because of the time. The ten years that are being marked by this conference have been a particularly pertinent period for the community that I work with – the Sudanese Refugee community. Incidentally, that is the fastest growing ethnic community both within Victoria and Australia. I wanted to start by looking at the idea of what ‘refuge’ and ‘asylum’ actually mean, and how it is that they are portrayed, particularly in the popular press.

The story – which is quite brief – starts with events that have been happening quite recently around the world. I got to work a couple of weeks ago and logged on to The Age Online to check out the headlines. There was what I thought was a truly magnificent headline – ‘Poor, destitute refugees seek shelter’. It’s a fantastic headline for a number of reasons but not the least of which is that it is extremely evocative, and it’s also very bold. Poor. Destitute. Both emotive terms... Refugee. A term that we are all too familiar with. Seeking shelter... The idea of a refugee seeking shelter is somewhat of a tautology, but that aside, the poor and the destitute elements were very appropriate. Given that that was the headline and it was on The Age’s website, I was fascinated to see what the story was actually about, knowing as I do that the refugee communities around the world are sizeable, and being poor and destitute and seeking shelter is generally part of the deal. So I clicked through. The article was about the people of New Orleans, USA. It was an article about those people who were fleeing the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. I had a very serious concern with those words being used in that context. The concern was – they were not, in fact, poor. They lived in what is the world’s richest country. They were not destitute, and I say that because the article came with an image of three seriously oversized (one may even say obese) American people, with a trolley full of their belongings. Destitute? I think not. Refugees? Well, the fact that they are in their own country means that by definition they are not. And seeking shelter is the last part of the headline. Well the problem I had with that part was that in the same image of the rather oversized Americans, there is a picture of a number of sheltered areas, one of them being a car park. While none of us would particularly like to stay in a car park for any length of time, one could only look at the photo and note that the seeking of shelter could only have lasted about 30 seconds longer, because there it was – right in front of them.

* Please note – this paper is a direct transcript of a presentation given in the absence of a written submission. The turn of phrase is thus less formal than would usually be expected from an academic paper.

Well, my anger, expressed today, was far stronger on that particular day. After clicking through the headline and reading the article, I then decided that the most appropriate thing was to call the Editor of The Age, which I promptly did. I managed to get through to The Age Online editor – to the man himself – and unfortunately for that gentleman gave him an earful of criticism, deconstructing the title as I've just done, and stating that pretty much every part of it was either inaccurate or offensive, or both. In the end, the title changed between 11.19am on September 2, 2005 and 11.54am on the same day, from 'Poor, destitute refugees seek shelter' to 'Poor and destitute seek shelter'. An improvement, but not exactly what I was hoping for.

Now why is it that I care, and why is it that I think my anger and fury (perhaps not my abuse!) were justified? The reason is because of what the value of this term 'refugee' means to me, and to many of the people that I have the privilege of working with.

So how does this all fit together? Well, my story starts about five years ago, with the birth of an organization that has come to be known as the SAIL Program (Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning Program). SAIL caters specifically to the Sudanese Refugee Community, and I find it interesting in talking about this community to look at the timeline that we're talking about during the course of this conference – the 1995–2005 timeline. Not that the correlation was necessarily made in the planning, but that timeline is – crudely speaking – the timeline in which the Sudanese community has sprung out of nowhere to become – now – a population of around 16,000. In 1995 there were around 200 people in Australia, and now we have this fairly sizeable figure. It should be noted that during this period there have been very few who have been detained as part of Australia's mandatory immigration detention policy. This is due to the fortunate fact that the Sudanese refugee community (for the most part) get offshore humanitarian visas, which means that on arrival in Australia they have the full entitlements of other full Humanitarian entrants.

The story of the SAIL Program starts, as I said, about 5 years ago, when we (myself and a friend of mine from high school named Anna-Grace Hopkins) went out to a small rundown hall in Footscray. There was a single family there, 5 children of school age, and 2 little ones, who we kind of hung out with on a weekly basis, assisting them with their homework and trying to give them a foothold on the English language. From there, a second family came a couple of weeks later, and a few weeks after that, that family invited friends, and we had 3 families, and a good deal of panic on our hands, trying to work out what it was exactly that we should do next. From there the SAIL program has grown along a similar pattern, with us bringing in our friends, and then – not long after – people from the wider community to the program to assist with the most recent arrivals. Today we have around 300 volunteers; we have around 450 members of the Sudanese Refugee Community using our services each week, at 3 campuses across Melbourne – Dandenong, Footscray and Altona. There are plans for us to open more campuses due to demand, and a good possibility of opening campuses interstate, particularly in Adelaide, and Sydney.

What does the SAIL Program actually do? This is best answered by listing a series of activities. Predominately we offer free tutoring services on a Saturday morning. In addition to that we have excursions, camps, short courses and information sessions, all of which are offered for free at the 3 centres that I mentioned. The Sudanese community is in such early days in its formation as a migrant community in Australia that there are a number of issues that are not unique to them as a community, but certainly unique to most recent arrival communities. In particular I thought it would be relevant to raise three things which I think are the key issues, some of which the SAIL Program addresses, and some of which we do not. The three things are relating to finances and remittances, to domestic violence, and to identity. Because of the situation back in Sudan, the home of the world's longest running Civil war, the Sudanese community in Australia is faced with a particularly heavy obligation to support those who are back home in Sudan, or in refugee camps in countries surrounding Sudan, most especially in Kenya at Kakuma, in Uganda near Adjumani, and Cairo in Egypt. For the community here there is a general pattern that any additional finance is sent back by way of remittance to friends and family in those places. That is not seen really as a choice, but as an obligation, and the flow-on effect of that is quite dire in the situation here, in some cases. In particular, we have had a number of times where families have remitted back funds where there are in fact no funds to keep the family going here. The level of obligation is so high that immediate needs seem to be sidelined.

An additional issue related to the resettlement experience is that of Domestic Violence. Domestic Violence is an issue that has been present for quite some time, but is very often misconstrued as being one of the social ills of the community, rather than the result of people coming into a completely foreign environment. Domestic Violence, obviously most often actioned by men, is at least in my view the result of the settlement experience of losing networks and prestige. I'll come back to this later on, but for a large number of men in the Sudanese community, they have come from positions of privilege, authority and respect. To arrive in Australia where they are not able to speak the language, where finding a job (at least in the initial post-resettlement period) is very difficult, and where holding the family together is also a great challenge, the result is a degree of frustration that often cannot be borne. Needless to say, Domestic Violence is a very grave concern and is one that we and other service providers are keen to address.

The last of the issues that I wanted to raise just briefly is that of identity. This is where I think the SAIL program plays a particularly important role of the children. We use the metaphor of the front door, and relate that to the way that the kids in particular look at themselves. Because, for the Sudanese community – as with all migrant communities – in the younger generation there is always this question as to whether they are Sudanese, or whether they are Australian. The front door we use because in our experience, when the children leave home to go to school in the morning, they walk out that door and they are expected to speak like Australian kids, to act like Australian kids, to espouse Australian 'values', and to fit in to the Australian 'way of life'. When they walk back in the door at the end of the

day, everything flips. They are expected to act Sudanese, speak their Sudanese language, to espouse Sudanese 'values', and to live out the Sudanese 'way of life'. That is an extremely difficult task, and one that far too often leads to a degree of family breakdown. What the SAIL Program provides is a halfway point, a place where the kids can be both Sudanese and Australian at the same time, and be comfortably both.

That I think is one of the great things that we provide, although it takes no resources and no effort, it is something that I think is very important in instilling in them a sense of pride in their own personal histories, and in their community history. And that leads me to the big philosophy the SAIL Program embodies, and that is a famous four-word phrase coming from the United Nations: Think Global, Act Local. To me the SAIL Program does exactly that, because the Sudanese Refugees here are the human by-product of things that are happening far away.

So, who are refugees, and asylum seekers, to Australia? Well the Sudanese Civil War has been reaping a fair bit of public attention over the last couple of years. What most people unfortunately don't know is that the most recent chapter occurring in Darfur is in fact just the latest instalment in a very large book of conflict dating back to 1983. The Civil War between the North and the South of Sudan bursts a number of superlatives. It is taking place in the largest country in Africa. It has resulted in the largest internally displaced population on the planet, with 4.4 million people homeless within Sudan and seeking the protection of the Sudanese government. In addition to that there have been some 2 million who have been fortunate enough to be able to escape Sudan itself and to seek refuge predominately in the three places that I listed earlier. Those statistics are enormous. They are so enormous that they are quite hard to get your head around. Perhaps the most marked statistic is that of the number of people killed in the North / South war – putting aside the conflict going on at present in Darfur. The North / South war, in 22 years, has resulted in the deaths of 2 million people. It's a meaningless number, one that is almost impossible to comprehend. But if you break it down, flesh it out and compare it to things that we are more familiar with, you get something like this:

- 2 million people in 22 years is the equivalent of a September 11 attack ever 12 days.
- It's the equivalent of hurricane Katrina – which as we know caused poor, destitute refugees to seek shelter – every 1.5 days.
- It's the equivalent of a London bombing every 5.5 hours for 22 years.

The 2 million people who have been made refugees from the Sudanese conflict in the South form a relatively small percentage of those people who are 'persons of concern' to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. As we meet, there are approx 19 million people who are regarded as refugees in the world. That generally is about the number of people in Australia. So who are the refugees in Australia? That's answered by the number of people who are resettled of those 19 million each year.

Combining all of the refugee resettlement nations including Australia, New Zealand, America, and some of the Scandinavian countries, all of those combined give a total of 100,000 resettlement places each year. So you've gone from the population of Australia down to the MCG on a very good day. It's not hard to see from those numbers that the people who end up in our neighbourhoods are people who have got into a position that is very highly sought after, and perhaps more appropriately described as highly competitive. This is not something that gets a lot of attention in resettlement countries, but it is something that I think needs to be given some more emphasis, because it paints a very clear picture of how we and how refugee resettlement programs fit into the grander scheme of things, that being situations of war and peace around the world. What concerns me is that we focus our attention and indeed our resources on this very small number, and at the same time effectively ignore the majority. It seems to me that in Australia we are spending our time and money focussing on the icing, and not necessarily on the cake. Asylum seekers are not issues, beings and creations of themselves. They are, as I said earlier, the human by-product of conflict and war. It upsets me – and I've written publicly about this before – that Australia has had a minimal role at best in Sudan itself, and yet is very active (and appropriately so) in welcoming Sudanese refugees to Australia. To me, the act of ignoring the war but taking in the select few of the survivors is not dissimilar to inviting people back after a funeral, when you could have prevented the death in the first place. The issues are global issues that one deals with when one actually gets into the creation, if you will, of refugee and asylum seeker situations. In Africa, where the Sudanese are largely processed before they come there are a number of refugee centres in which people are being housed on their way, ultimately (they hope – but it only happens to very few) to countries like Australia. The situations in these camps where people have been living for up to 13 years (as in Kakuma where I worked in 2004) have been known previously as a 'protracted refugee situation'. The term 'protracted refugee situation' is a very clinical and antiseptic term, which doesn't evoke very much of interest. In about May of 2004, a term replaced it. This term came out of the United States, and was particularly championed by Senator Ted Kennedy. The phrase is this idea of 'refugee warehousing'. Refugee warehousing is a far more appropriate term, and it's one that I think fits more comfortably with the surroundings of the camps, at least the one that I experienced. Refugee warehousing also give a very clear idea as to where – in my view and in the view of many – the attention of the world should be. And that is in resolving the underlying cause of refugee and asylum seeker situations by resolving conflict itself.

So we come to this question of why, ultimately, should we be caring at all about those seeking asylum in Australia over the last ten years, and of course, over the next ten years and beyond. When I was working in Kenya in 2004 I was stationed for a couple of months in the Kakuma refugee camp. This camp is home to over 90,000 refugees, 60,000 of whom are from Sudan. They are refugees by definition under the Convention. And while the idea of a refugee is ultimately purely a legal term, there is a very real and pragmatic basis to it. Because behind the legalese, the people at the camp (all 90,000 of them) had, I realised after some time, made a choice from three options:

- The choice of seeking asylum, as the fortunate few do
- Dying at the hand of another person
- Or dying by their own hand

When you live in a situation such as a refugee camp and with the extreme privilege that I enjoy, it's very hard not to ponder the thought of what exactly I would do in the same situation, when faced with those three choices. That question came home to me on the same trip overseas, when I found a letter that I'd not read before, that explained the decision of one person. That letter, in essence, was (as was described to me when I obtained it) that person's 'last letter'. It was written by a person who when faced with those three choices decided, in the interests of honour and prestige, perhaps, to take his own life. The letter was signed by a gentleman called Leo Lippmann. What most of you will not know is my full name, which is Matthew Lawrence Lippmann Albert. Leo Lippmann wrote this letter having been told in 1943 that he was about to be taken to Terezin, a concentration camp used as a front by the Nazis to woo people into a sense of security about the concentration camp process. Well, just a few weeks ago I was in the Czech Republic for the first time and went to Terezin myself, a place that no one in my family – including Leo Lippmann – had ever been. Well, on reflection, I think he probably made the right choice. Ultimately, behind what we see on the news, and behind this magical title of 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker', are the people. And behind them is the politics. For the people in the refugee camp, and for most refugees and asylum seekers, there comes a point when there are only seven letters in the English language that stand between them and death itself, and those seven letters spell the word REFUGEE. It is a word the sanctity of which cannot be reduced, and it is a word that we should all see the importance of, not only in a local setting like this, but also in a global setting, in a setting of conflict and war. And more especially, in the pursuit of peace.

Well it seems appropriate when reflecting on the last ten years to end by talking about the next ten years. The asylum seeker policy is due for a reshape. It is a policy that has served a huge number of communities very well, not the least of which is the Sudanese community – the beneficiaries of the same policy over the last ten years, I think. But there's a phrase that I would like to end with, which comes out of the United Nations, that I think is a magnificent phrase, and would provide a very useful direction in terms of how the policy is reshaped over the last 10 years. The phrase comes from the United Nations doctrines relating to repatriation. To people returning to situations that were previously in conflict and war – to resettle, and rebuild, and re root, to make sure that their homeland comes back into being a healthy and stable nation. And the phrase talks about the situation in which people are encouraged to repatriate. It's a lovely phrase that would work as a very good guiding light for our asylum policy. It asks that decisions only be made for repatriation when people can do so... and here it is... in safety, and with dignity.

Let us hope that this is how the policy is reshaped in the next ten years. Thank you.