South Sudanese Community Organisations in Sydney

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Abstract:

This paper analyses the development of South Sudanese community structures in Sydney, Australia. The paper argues that the development of South Sudanese community structures in Sydney cannot be understood without analysing pre-migration experiences of South Sudanese themselves. Drawing on Sassen-Koob's argument that the nature of ethnic community structures is determined by the degree of disparity between the country of birth and the receiving country, the current paper argues that the proliferation of South Sudanese community associations is not negative but an indication that South Sudanese in Sydney are trying to find the best possible way they could articulate with mainstream society in the most effective and efficient way. Those structures that don't work will be lost and new ones will be developed.

Introduction

One important feature of the South Sudanese community in Sydney is its vibrant community life through participation in voluntary associations. There are over fifty South Sudanese community associations in Sydney[2]. For some South Sudanese and some members of the mainstream community including service providers, the proliferation of associations in the South Sudanese community is perceived as indicative of a community falling apart. It is seen as a sign of weakening community cohesion. This is not the case. It has been observed that immigrants get to organise wherever they go. The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) has recently published a paper on its website aiming to bring some clarity to this misunderstood aspect of refugee communities[3]. RCOA strongly argued that refugee community organisations play a critical role in settlement outcomes for members of the communities they represent. This paper will build on this by providing more nuanced details of how South Sudanese community in Sydney has created its own community structures that meet its needs.

This paper is a reworking of a report I wrote for Anglicare Migrant and Refugee Services based in Sydney. The report was one of two written to provide background information about the South Sudanese community in Sydney[4]. This information was collected between May and July 2015 as part of a baseline survey for "South Sudanese Diversity and Social Cohesion Project" funded by the Federal Department of Social Services (DSS). The information that went into the two reports and some of it in this paper came from my PhD fieldwork that I conducted in 2011/12 in Sydney. During this period I conducted interviews with South Sudanese community members and service providers including settlement service providers and government agencies at both federal and state levels. I also used participant/observation to complement interviews. Most of the participant/observation happened at community meetings or events organised by different community organisations over that one year. Some information was also collected recently for the "South Sudanese Diversity and Social Cohesion Project" through talking to members of the South Sudanese community informally during casual conversations and formally during meetings.

The focus in this paper will be on how South Sudanese community voluntary associations get formed. I am not only interested in what these associations do but also in what drives their formation and the nature of community structures that are formed out of this. I am also interested in why migrants seem to form ethnic or community organisations. It is important to find some answers to these questions because they help us better understand what migrant community organisations are all about. From the surface South Sudanese community structures look chaotic and ineffective and therefore participation is viewed by some South Sudanese as a waste of time. However, a closer look reveals something else and that is what this paper is about.

Some perspectives on migrant community organisations

RCOA's paper on refugee community organisations points out that there is a number of different ways refugee community organisations are referred to[5]:

> ..... *from referring to them through the use of the generic term "communities", "refugee communities" or "ethnic communities", to more explicit references to organisational structures, such as "immigrant organisations", "ethno-specific organisations" or "ethnic community-based organisations"*

Whichever term used it means the same thing – group organisation of which RCOA gives a definition [6]:

> .... *RCOA defines a refugee community organisation as any group, association or structure that is created by refugee and humanitarian entrants for the benefit of their own self-defined cultural community.*

From this definition there are two important phrases – "self-defined" and "benefit of…. Community" or the "common interest". Shirley Jenkins defined community organisations as[7]:

> *An ethnic association can be defined as an organisation formed by individuals who consciously define themselves as members of an ethnic group within a large context..... It fulfils needs common to persons of its defined group, and typically sees itself as part of an ethnic community. In terms of what it does, an ethnic association may exist for a wide variety of reasons: social, recreational, political, cultural professional, business, service, or a combination of some or all of the above. It usually has a core of members, but non-members may also be involved. The key elements are ... a self-defined ethnic group, the voluntary nature of the association, and the goal of mutual benefit.*

Jenkins, in addition to defining what migrant[8] organisations are, summarised what migrant community organisations do and the nature of those who participate. Jenkins was in

agreement with RCOA that "self-identification" and the "common interest" are the most important features of community groups organising and forming community structures such as ethnic community associations.

Is "self-identification" as an ethnic group and having a group "common interest" enough to get migrant communities organised? From the above definitions a suggestion is made that it is likely that groups who self-identify and have some common interest such as some mutual benefit that accrues from organising or mobilising will form community organisations. Susan Olzak[9] suggests that this might be the case. Olzak wrote about ethnic community mobilisation and defined ethnic mobilisation as[10]:

> ....*the process by which groups organise around some feature of ethnic identity (for example, skin colour, language, customs) in pursuit of collective ends.*

However, Olzak argued that, in addition to a group self-identifying and the existence of a group common interest, competition for employment or an expanding political system lead to ethnic mobilisation. Competition for employment may mean that a certain ethnic group takes over a particular employment sector and ensures that only the members know about available jobs and take up those jobs on the expense of other ethnic communities who might wish to enter that sector of employment. For example, in regional areas of Australia where South Sudanese have been settled, meat processing has become an important employment sector for them[11]. If Olzak's argument is applied to South Sudanese who have settled in regional areas of Australia, it can be predicted that if a different ethnic group emerged in regional Australia that sees meat processing as an employment option, South Sudanese are likely to mobilise and ensure that this new group is kept out of meat processing to ensure that jobs available at meat processing go to members of the South Sudanese community who are looking for employment. Of course this is a hypothetical example given to explain what Olzak meant by

competition for employment leads to ethnic mobilisation. In Australia, political parties seriously began to engage ethnic communities, encouraging them to mobilise, and influence the political process in the 1970s resulting into an organised ethnic lobby[12]. The expanding political system in Australia in the 1970s encouraged migrant mobilisation.

Other scholars disagree that ethnic self-identification and the pursuit of collective common interest are enough by themselves to lead to ethnic mobilisation. Studies done in America comparing the participation of different ethnic groups found that self-identification and the pursuit of collective common interest even in an expanding political system and in the face of competition for employment did not necessarily lead to ethnic mobilisation. For example, Cohen and Kapsis pointed out that not all deprived ethnic communities mobilise[13]. They argued that for an ethnic group to mobilise, activism has to be a community norm. If the norms of an ethnic group don't support activism, little mobilisations is observed. Olsen agreed with Cohen and Kapsis and argued that as a result of activism being a cultural norm, members of an ethnic group can be pressurised to mobilise and become active[14]. However, Sassen-Koob, in a study of Dominicans and Colombians in New York, observed that the "disparity between the place of birth and the receiving country" provides another explanation for why ethnic minorities join voluntary associations[15].

All the different perspectives above are relevant to understanding migrant community organisations as we will soon see in the case of South Sudanese community associations in Sydney. Ethnic community organisations, as shown by Jenkins and RCOA, play a very critical role in service delivery to ethnic communities. They also allow immigrants to replicate social structures that are familiar to them which ease their adjustment process[16]. In

addition, such structures facilitate articulation with the host society[17] in ways immigrants are comfortable with.

Development of South Sudanese community structures

Now that some ideas have been explored about migrant community organisations, it is time to return to the focus of this paper and look more closely at South Sudanese community associations. Almost all South Sudanese came to Australia through the humanitarian program between mid-1990s and mid-2000s from refugee camps in East Africa and from North Africa, primarily Egypt, where they sought asylum[18]. South Sudanese are a diverse group of people and have had diverse pre-migration experiences. From the outside the South Sudanese community appears homogenous with all its members sharing the same values and culture. The experience of war and displacement that resulted in the dispersal of most of the population in South Sudan due to war means that South Sudanese have lived in diverse places and contexts for a long time before coming to Australia. All these features of the South Sudanese community play an important role in mediating and moderating community structures that evolved in Australia and are still in flux.

The first few South Sudanese who came to Sydney in the mid to late 1990s got organised immediately and formed the "Community of Southern Sudan and Other Marginalised Areas Association" (CSSOMAA). It is highly likely that the majority of South Sudanese who arrived in Sydney during this period were from Egypt. Members of the South Sudanese community who arrived in Sydney from Egypt in the late 1990s have a clear memory of how CSSOMAA started. However, South Sudanese community members who came to Sydney from East Africa tend to talk about the early days when the South Sudanese community had a single united organisation and structure. It also seems that those South Sudanese who have

come to Australia from Egypt had experienced community mobilising in North Sudan and in Egypt. A large number of South Sudanese, during the war in the 1980s and 1990s, attended institutions of higher education in North Sudan and in Egypt. All the South Sudanese males who came to Australia from Egypt that I interviewed for my PhD thesis told me about students' activism at the universities they went to and that in turn encouraged them to form their own student associations where authorities allowed. They also spoke about community mobilising that occurred in Egypt which enabled South Sudanese asylum seekers to advocate on behalf of the community so that their refugee status was recognised by the UNHCR[19]. Formation and managing community associations require skills[20]. South Sudanese who arrived in Sydney from East Africa early on had little or no experience with formal community mobilising which seems to me would have placed them in a place of disadvantage in terms of starting community organisations in Sydney right away.

Early on the South Sudanese community was highly cohesive. Those who arrived in Sydney from Egypt have escaped the worst of the civil war in the 1980s and 1990s. This is not to say they have not suffered. They have suffered enormously. Most of them lived in Khartoum in North Sudan before seeking asylum in Egypt. They were constantly harassed by Sudanese security forces, detained, and many disappeared with no trace. They lived like second class citizens in their own country. In public, they were abused and called names. In Egypt they suffered in the hands of the Egyptians. They suffered racism, extortion, and exploitation. Stories of South Sudanese women pushed over from high rise buildings by their employers resulting in their deaths were told. South Sudanese women who came from Egypt believed that when they went to hospital to have babies, they were in danger of losing organs and therefore, when they went into labour they had to have the baby as quickly as they could to get out of hospital.

Due to these difficult experiences South Sudanese in Egypt held together as a community and supported each other in the face of suffering. In Egypt they were able to mobilise and advocate for themselves. The Catholic Church in Cairo provided a safe platform from which South Sudanese mobilised to advocate for their needs to be met and to be recognised as refugees who could be considered for resettlement. This context, freedom to mobilise and support from the Catholic Church, enabled South Sudanese in Cairo to create a strong bond among themselves. The level of trust and cooperation was high and hence social capital among them was strong.

The strong social capital that was built among South Sudanese in Egypt was brought to Australia by those early South Sudanese arrivals. It was from this that the South Sudanese community in Sydney, in the early days of settlement, could work together and form a single organisation that catered for the needs of all the members of the community. Those South Sudanese who were in Sydney during that period proudly tell stories of how the South Sudanese community as a whole drove to Sydney airport to meet newly arrived South Sudanese. A whole week worth of food was purchased by the community for the newly arrived members. South Sudanese community members helped newly arrived families and individuals to find schools for children, find housing and find employment.

In the meantime, the Australian government diversified the intake sources of South Sudanese humanitarian entrants. Slowly the focus shifted to East Africa. Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya became the principle source of South Sudanese humanitarian entrants coming through to Sydney. A few came from refugee camps in Ethiopia and occasionally Uganda. Those South Sudanese who arrived in Sydney from East Africa had a different experience of the

war. They directly experienced the war. Many of them lost property and family. They experienced the trauma and the horror of war. The war was brutal especially when a neighbouring tribe armed against their neighbour. Tensions between tribes were high fuelled by the Sudanese government giving resources to militias to wreak havoc among innocent unarmed civilians. Some remained as internally displaced persons. Others crossed borders and became refugees. In refugee camps tribal tensions never subsided as the vicious war continued feeding the camps with news of tragedy and revenge. Refugee camps embraced tribalism and camps were divided into zones that were designated for each tribe. There was no mixing of dwellings. Children born and growing up in these refugee camps didn't need to be taught tribalism. They lived and breathed it.

For those South Sudanese who arrived in Sydney from East African refugee camps, there was no trust in other people. Cooperation was a strange idea. What they knew was tribal competition. The sense of community was not extended beyond immediate tribal or sub-tribal affiliations. However, the interesting thing about this group was that it saw suffering before coming to Australia in a positive light. They saw themselves as fighters who suffered for a just cause. They did not run away from suffering. They braved it and it was right and they were prepared to start all over again and make something of themselves in Australia.

As the South Sudanese community kept growing at a fast rate, the community began to experience tension. The initial high level of social capital was under threat as different ideas started to float about within the community. CSSOMAA was still the only community organisation representing South Sudanese. It was becoming better organised and providing services to members of the community. It was being noticed for speaking up for the South Sudanese community. Government agencies and services wanted to know from CSSOMAA

how the South Sudanese community could be helped. CSSOMAA became, for South Sudanese, an important platform that enabled them to articulate with the wider society successfully.

At this point in the development of South Sudanese community structures, older male members of the community were dominant. Female members of the community especially those who arrived with children (that was the majority) focused on the welfare of the children freeing the males in the community to pursue community interests. Children and young people formed the overwhelming majority in the South Sudanese community but didn't play an active role until later.

As time went on, some South Sudanese communities began to swell in numbers. The Dinka community with all its sections was out growing everybody in numbers in the South Sudanese community. Members of the South Sudanese community from the Equatoria region of South Sudan formed a large proportion of the community but that proportion was in decline. However, members of the Equatoria community were a coalition of tribes and when counted in terms of individual tribes their numbers dwindled. Some Dinka groups began to agitate for more power in CSSOMAA. The situation quickly deteriorated and conflict was looming in CSSOMAA. The South Sudanese community was at a critical point and was ushering into a new era of tricky intra-communal dynamism. The situation in CSSOMAA became untenable and South Sudanese from Equatoria broke off and formed Equatoria Community Welfare Association (ECWA). Soon ECWA was getting funded to deliver projects and services to its members. That was a new phenomenon the South Sudanese community was experiencing.

CSSOMAA couldn't hold together any more and groups started to emerge from everywhere. Soon a new term was coined by South Sudanese for the emerging structure – sub-communities. What is interesting is that the new structure initially emerged along tribal lines with members of the Equatoria community forming ECWA and literally leaving behind CSSOMAA that was completely dominated by the Dinka. ECWA saw itself as a rival to CSSOMAA. So in this new structure CSSOMAA and ECWA became the South Sudanese peak bodies in Sydney. It is common to talk about South Sudanese peak community organisations or community organisations meaning ECWA and CSSOMAA. The tribal grouping that have emerged under ECWA are referred to as sub-communities though they represent different tribes. Sub-communities under CSSOMAA are predominantly Dinka. They represent the various Dinka sections and sub-sections.

There are three factors that explain the emergence of sub-community groups. The first is the inability of the South Sudanese community to deal with the pressure that came with the explosion in the size of the community in a short time. This placed huge pressure on CSSOMAA. The heightened tension in the community that came with such pressure couldn't be resolved. The solution was to break up CSSOMAA so that tension is diffused. So, the emergence of sub-communities in the South Sudanese community was a conflict resolution mechanism. Secondly, the emergence of the younger generation of South Sudanese, especially those who came from East African refugee camps, meant that the fault line along which the breakdown was going to happen was tribal and sub-tribal. It seems to me that those who came to Australia as young people had stepped up and decided that sub-community structures work better. All sub-community associations and the two peak bodies in the South Sudanese community are now dominated by people who arrived in Australia a few years earlier as teenagers or in their twenties. Older members of the community who started

community organising in the mid to late 1990s have now taken the back seat to allow the younger generation to take the community on. So, what we see with sub-communities is actually a generational shift in the South Sudanese community. Sub-communities seem to be working currently very well. The last explanation for the emergence of sub-community structures in the South Sudanese community is the inability of peak bodies (CSSOMAA and ECWA) to extend their mandate to other areas of community interest. CSSOMAA and ECWA focus on settlement issues for the South Sudanese community in Sydney. They are often called upon by the community to step up and be the voice of a united South Sudanese community in Sydney. CSSOMAA and ECWA are playing this role effectively. However, CSSOMAA and ECWA don't have the capacity to deal with many on the ground issues that sub-community associations deal with in a culturally appropriate manner. For example, sub-community associations tend to mediate family conflict. Sub-communities effectively and efficiently mobilise resources when families need them the most for example when a family member dies or when families are under stress and need community support. Sub-communities also aim at providing assistance to people in South Sudan for example by raising money to build a school, a hospital, or whatever people in South Sudan tell them is needed.

Conclusion

Sassen-Koob, in a study of Dominicans and Colombians in New York, reported that among the Dominicans there were a large number of community organisations as compared to among the Colombians. Sassen-Koob argued that the difference between these two groups can be explained by "disparity between the place of birth and the receiving country". The Colombians who migrated to New York were professionals who have lived in big cities before migrating to New York. They were a highly educated class of people whose life style

and experience before migrating to New York was not so different from that of New York. Therefore, Colombians in New York studied by Sassen-Koob formed fewer but professional organisations whose main aim was to articulate with receiving country institutions. The Dominicans came to New York straight from the village. Many of them didn't have much education and had not experienced city life before. The disparity between their life before migrating and that after migrating was huge. Sassen-Koob reported that many of the organisations set up by Dominicans were focused on cultural preservation. They were meant to replicate social structures that were familiar to them. Sassen-Koob argued that both the Colombians and the Dominicans were aiming at the same thing by setting up different kinds of organisations. They were all aiming at articulating with the receiving country's institutions. It would take the Dominicans some time but eventually they would adjust within these structures and articulate with receiving country institutions.

I agree with Sassen-Koob. The proliferation of associations in the South Sudanese community is a healthy response to the huge disparity that exists between South Sudan and Australia. South Sudanese are a small but a noticeable minority in Australia which places them in a marginal position. South Sudanese are economically marginalised as they are yet to make their way up the class ladder as a group. Mainstream Australia considers herself middle-class, something South Sudanese aspire to achieve with time.

It can be seen from the above that activism and participation are important community norms that push South Sudanese community members to mobilise and place themselves in the best possible position not only to help themselves within the South Sudanese community but also to bridge the gap between South Sudan and Australia and effectively articulate with

Australian institutions to bring the desired change for South Sudanese in Australia and for Australians in Australia.

One thing that we can learn from the South Sudanese community structure is that the nature of refugee community organisations is grounded in their pre-migration experiences and that with every generational shift within a community new structures emerge that are not necessarily better than the ones before them. New structures that emerge within refugee communities are indicative of the fact that these communities are getting better at managing settlement and at inventing structures that are better suited to meet the challenges refugee communities currently face. Jane Martin, in a Study of European community organisations in Adelaide, argued that migrant community structures are in constant flux reflecting the changing nature of settling communities and the changes in the wider community around them[21].

[1] The author is writing a PhD on the settlement experiences of South Sudanese families in Western Sydney. The thesis investigates how multiple displacements and migrations before coming to Australia and the Australian context itself impact on the settlement of South Sudanese and how best should settlement services respond to humanitarian entrants to enable them settle successfully.

[2] In June 2015 the author obtained a list of South Sudanese community associations from the Community of Southern Sudan and Other Marginalised Areas Association (CSSOMAA) for the South Sudanese Diversity and Social Cohesion Project run by Anglicare Sydney and funded by the Federal Department of Social Services. Based on this list, the author estimates that there were more than 50 South Sudanese associations in Sydney.

[3] Refugee Council of Australia. 2014. *The Strength Within: The Role of Refugee Community Organisations in Settlement*. Sydney: Refugee Council of Australia. http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/r/rpt/1405_StrengthWithin.pdf.

[4] Atem, A. 2015. *Mapping South Sudanese Community Cohesion: Voluntary Associations in Sydney*. Report No. 1. South Sudanese Diversity and Social Cohesion Project. Anglicare Sydney (unpublished); Atem, A. 2015. *Mapping South Sudanese Community Cohesion: The State of community Cohesion*. Report No. 2. South Sudanese Diversity and Social Cohesion Project. Anglicare Sydney (unpublished)

[5] Refugee Council of Australia. 2014. *The Strength Within: The Role of Refugee Community Organisations in Settlement*. Sydney: Refugee Council of Australia (page 3) http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/r/rpt/1405_StrengthWithin.pdf.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Jenkins, S. 1988. *Introduction: Immigration, Ethnic Associations, and social services*. In Shirley Jenkins (ed.) Ethnic Associations and the Welfare State: Services to Immigrants in Five Countries. New York: Columbia University Press. (See page 10 for the definition of migrant associations)

[8] Note that in this paper "ethnic" and "migrant" are used interchangeably.

[9] Olzak, S. 1983. *Contemporary Ethnic Mobilisation*. Annual Review of Sociology, 9:355-374.

[10] Ibid, page 355.

[11] Boeses, M. 2013. *At the Meatworks and Beyond: South Sudanese Employment Experiences in Regional Australia*. In Jay Marlowe, Anne Harris, & Tanya Lyons (ed.), South Sudanese Diaspora in Australia and New Zealand: Reconciling the Present and the Past. Newcastle(UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing. (see page 150)

[12] Jupp, J. 2002. *From White Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (See page 29)

[13] Cohen, S. and Kapsis, R. 1978. *Participation of Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Whites in Voluntary Associations: A test of Current Theories*. Social Forces, 56(4) 1053-1071.

[14] Olsen, M. 1970. *Social and Political Participation of Blacks*. American Sociological Review, 35(4) 682-697.

[15] Sassen-Koob, S. 1979. *Formal and Informal Associations: Dominicans and Colombians in New York*. International Migration Review, 13(2) 314-332.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid. Also RCOA (2014).

[18] Department of Immigration and Citizenship. 2007. *Sudanese Community Profile*. Canberra: Department of Immigration and Citizenship. https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/11_2013/community-profile-sudan.pdf

[19] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the United Nation office responsible for taking care of refugees.

[20] Cohen and Kapsis (1978) found that poor black American women were participating in community groups at a higher rate than the average black American man because they learnt the necessary skills needed to participate in activism through working for white middle class American families. (see page 1065)

[21] Martin, J. 1972. *Community and Identity: Refugee Groups in Adelaide*. Canberra: Australian National University.