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RESEARCH BRIEF

**Preventing Violence in Global Cities:
Insights from Educated South Sudanese Youth in Melbourne**

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The Dilemma

Cities around the world have seen heightened insecurity with youth involved in various violent incidents. Whilst reasons for this are diverse and complex, the theme of disenfranchised youth engaging in violence due to marginalisation is seen as important. For example, there has been a lot of recent discussion about the link between the issues faced by and actions of Muslim youth in developed country capitals, and it is often assumed that being from Muslim dominant countries or conflict affected ethnic groups are in themselves risk indicators. However, there is an urgent need to treat youth violence as not only a security issue. Overall, further research on the nexus between youth unemployment and conflict/crime is critical to support vulnerable communities, prevent violence and support global peace-building. Research is particularly needed on the experiences of migrant youth from conflict affected countries in developed-country cities and the challenges they face in finding suitable employment.

This brief discusses the links amongst urban poverty, unemployment and the risk of violence among South Sudanese youth in Melbourne. It highlights that that cities are places of both assimilation and disempowerment, and identifies key factors that prevent young vulnerable migrants who have lived in host countries for several years from reaching their full employment potential. Insights from the research highlight the critical challenges ahead for youth of South Sudanese background, and inform discussions on the links and stereotypes surrounding unemployment and conflict/crime. The brief emphasizes the need for the private sector to play an important role in providing job opportunities for youth. It also provides insights to global policy makers supporting migrants from conflict affected countries, particularly those who are vulnerable, to integrate in to the workforce and live productive lives.

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The research was based on a qualitative inquiry that included in-depth interviews with 7 educated South Sudanese youth in Melbourne. The random sample was chosen based on their higher technical and language skills, but not based on their current employment status. Interviews were conducted in confidence in person or through the phone using a semi-structured questionnaire in a language of their preference (all preferred to talk in English). While the South Sudanese do not have a Muslim background, this research highlights the need to go beyond stereotypical conflict-based perceptions of ethnicity and support targeted interventions for vulnerable groups. Such interventions are likely to not only reduce vulnerability and violence in large cities, but also strengthen peace-building efforts in home countries.

Socio-economic Issues of Youth in South Sudan

South Sudan is the world's newest country, but continues to experience a delicate ceasefire in its conflict affected history. It is amongst the poorest in the world, and its youth face one of the world's highest unemployment rates. South Sudan is also considered the second most fragile state in the world². The South Sudan conflict claimed the lives of over 2 million people and displaced millions more. As one of the most fragile countries in the world, South Sudan is considered one of the least safe countries. Despite many other developing countries also facing significant problems, few have the enormity of challenges that confront the people of South Sudan on a daily basis. Having gained independence from Sudan in July 2011, the country is the youngest in the world, and has still not managed to create a stable governance structure. Recent violence in the capital Juba in July 2016 between the factions of the President and Vice President is a clear indication of the post-independence disputes that remain unaddressed and constrain development, and the precarious situation that many people face.

With most of South Sudan's population not having access to basic services, it is no surprise that social indicators are at the bottom of comparison lists of countries. Official data is scant and unreliable. However, available data from 2011 suggests that only 6% and 14% of girls and boys respectively complete primary education; and 53% and 22% of the urban adult population and rural adult population are literate. It has one of the highest rates of maternal mortality (2,054 deaths per 100,000 live births), infant mortality (102 out of 1000) and under-5 mortality (135 out of 1000) in the world. The employment rate is only 12%, and 46% of children between 10-14 participate in the economy³.

The youth in the country face a number of challenges related to unemployment. For the few employment opportunities available, there are significant skills mismatches. Many youth lack proper qualifications that are credible or suitable for the job market, and are drawn into the conflict due to lack of other opportunities.

Issues faced by Recent Migrants from South Sudan in Australia

In contrast to South Sudan, Australia provides ones of the highest qualities of life in the world. Few places can match Australian cities such as Melbourne for opportunities and safety. Indeed, many of the lucky South Sudanese were those refugees who entered Australia through its Humanitarian Program between 2002 – 2005. During this time, South Sudan was Australia's priority country for refugees. With good social and economic indicators, and political stability, few in Australia would expect significant vulnerability for fluent English speaking, university educated, socially integrated youth, whatever their ethnic background. Moreover, given the current

² Fragile States Index 2016, Fund for Peace

³ Oxfam Canada (undated). Country Profile: South Sudan. Oxfam. Retrieved from <http://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/imce/country-profile-south-sudan.pdf>

bias and media attention in large cities in developed countries against Muslim youth, being of non-Muslim background such as those from South Sudan could also be considered a positive factor in the search for a good job.

During the National Census in 2011 in Australia, it was estimated that there were 19,369 Sudan-born people in Australia with the State of Victoria (largest city being Melbourne) having the largest number (6,085). Most could be considered as being from what is now South Sudan. Despite the country gaining independence in 2011, during the census, a further 3,486 persons stated they were born in South Sudan and this figure can be added to the above Sudan-born figure. Using the Sudan-born data, one can surmise that most (61.1%) arrived between 2001 and 2006, with a lesser number (14.6%) arriving between 2007 – 2011. The median individual income of Sudan-born population above 15 years was \$294, which was significantly lower than that of other foreign born individuals (\$538) and all Australian (\$577). 43.9% of Sudan-born individuals had a higher non-school qualification, lower than the Australian average of 55.9%. Importantly, the unemployment rate of South Sudanese was 25.4%, significantly higher than the corresponding figure for the total Australian population (5.6%)⁴.

Many of the challenges that newly arrived South Sudanese migrants and refugees face have been attributed to those related to many families, especially adults, finding it difficult to adjust and integrate in to Australian culture. Key challenges include those related to social isolation, cultural shock, unemployment, housing, racism and discrimination. Ability to settle quickly also depends on education and skills and many continue to face challenges several years after arrival due to language and other cultural factors. Social support is generally considered useful to connect with the new country whilst also maintaining links with people back in their home country. The Australian Government provides extensive support and settlement services for a fixed period. Despite this support, many families continue to struggle after the support ends.

It is not uncommon for parents of refugee families from several countries to face employment challenges immediately upon arrival. In fact, a recent research study suggested that one in three new migrants had difficulty getting their first job in Australia with the unemployment rate for people of non-English speaking backgrounds double the national average⁵. This is mainly attributed to lack of relevant experience, references, language and prejudice. Importantly, finding a satisfactory job was considered the main indicator of successful settlement amongst refugees, and considered essential for material welfare and identity⁶. However, many have been forced into the lower ranks of jobs if they were even lucky to get a job. Atem (2008) concludes that people of African descent face more challenges than other ethnic groups and face significant unemployment, inactivity, disguised unemployment and under-employment both due to lack of skills and discrimination⁷.

There remains an important gap in the literature that differentiates the employment challenges that new migrants face and those of their children who have been educated in Australia and have better “integrated” or “assimilated” into society. Whilst it seems obvious that recent migrants who have

⁴ Australian Government. (undated). Community Information Summary Sudan-Born. Retrieved from https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/02_2014/sudan.pdf

⁵ Mercer, P. (2014). Australian Migrants Struggle to Find Work. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-29206260> London: BBC News

⁶ Deng, W.B. (2014). The Settlement Challenges Facing South Sudanese Refugee Families in Melbourne. Retrieved from <https://paanuelwel.com/2013/04/14/the-settlement-challenges-facing-the-south-sudanese-refugee-families-in-melbourne/>

⁷ Atem, P. (2008). An Investigation of the Challenges Facing African Refugee Communities in the Australian Workforce: Findings from a Qualitative Study of Sudanese and Liberian Refugees in South Australia, University of South Australia.

not settled well socially into Australian society would face significant challenges, research on Australian educated youth who have made the transition is particularly important. Moreover, given that South Sudanese youth have been branded as a risk group from a violence perspective, views of the more integrated youth on links between employment and crime/conflict can be insightful.

Key Findings on Assimilated Educated Youth in Melbourne

All those interviewed had significant hopes before coming to Australia 11-12 years ago. This was particularly significant because they had gone through a lot of hardship as children and felt that they would be entering a safe and developed country which had become home to many previous refugees. The youth had followed their parents as children, and their mindset and high expectations of Australia were based on views expressed by their parents and other officials.

After coming to Australia, all interviewees performed well in school and furthered their education into the tertiary level. All except one had completed tertiary level education at reputed Australia universities. Whilst they had hoped for and received a better life in Australia than what they had in the early part of their lives, all also continued to feel disadvantaged compared to Australian friends especially about their current employment situation. This was particularly notable because many had studied hard and achieved educational success. Indeed, all youth interviewed were unemployed or working at the lower rungs of the workforce ladder. None were working in the field that they studied despite having strong English language and technical skills. It was clear that they had tried hard to adapt to the Australian way of life, but were significantly constrained in finding suitable employment.

Their perceptions on the reasons for difficulties in finding employment are notable. Education and skills training had not led to the opportunities expected, and many felt that experience in the field of study was more valued. However, the key reasons that were identified for their sub-optimal employment situation was the lack of networks and racial profiling. There also appeared to be a lot of competition for the low end jobs as new migrants and refugees arrived in the city.

The perceptions of educated youth on the links between employment and violence are noteworthy. Importantly, none expressed any personal intention to vent their frustration through violent means. They, however, felt that it was not surprising that many of those who did were unemployed. Moreover, their views indicate that the crimes committed by some disadvantaged youth and widely publicised in the media had affected the lives of all those in the community. Negative perceptions about the community had further ingrained violence-based stereotypes and lessened the employment opportunities for educated and skilled youth.

Lessons for Policy and Project Interventions

The interviewees felt that there was a clear correlation between unemployment and violence amongst South Sudanese youth in Melbourne, though none of those interviewed were involved in such activities. They believed that their employment status was largely due to factors beyond their control such as perceptions about violence in their community and racial profiling. The findings of this study suggest that policy makers and practitioners can significantly support prevention of violence in global cities if more employment opportunities were created for youth from conflict affected countries in a way that met their aspirations. This will require key stakeholders such as the private sector to make efforts to actively open jobs to those from vulnerable communities with suitable qualifications. Such initiatives can create hope for the youth and signal to other migrant families from conflict-affected countries that opportunity comes from hard work and not factors beyond their control. The result will be significant prevention in extremist violence and behaviour.