

# Education and Refugee Students from Southern Sudan

## Introduction

In 2004-05 Sudanese refugees represented the largest component of Australia's Humanitarian program and one of the fastest growing communities in Australia. This trend will continue with approximately 70% of Humanitarian entrants settling in Victoria coming from African countries, mainly from Southern Sudan. A small number of Sudanese enter Australia under other migrant categories, though they may have had similar refugee experiences. Approximately half of the Humanitarian arrivals are children and young people. One of their first experiences after entering Australia is to attend school. With the growing number of Sudanese students in Victorian schools it is important that school communities are able to provide supportive educational environments based on an understanding of the refugee experiences of their students and how these experiences continue to impact on their lives.

Refugee children and young people from Southern Sudan have been exposed to traumatic circumstances as a result of their forced displacement. War and other forms of violence have forced them to undertake unplanned and dangerous journeys to seek safety. Feelings of profound loss due to the death or separation from parents and other family members are common. Many have spent protracted periods in refugee camps or in slum-like conditions in towns, deprived of adequate food, shelter, health and education. On arrival in Australia they are faced with new settlement pressures including learning English, settling into homes, enrolling in schools and adjusting to a very different way of life.

**Schools can play a central role in nurturing the mental health and well-being of refugee students, providing stability and helping them to overcome learning difficulties.**



<http://rightsmaps.com/html/sudmap1.html>

Though many refugees show strong resilience, the trauma of their prior experiences may impact on their personal development and their ability to learn and integrate with the school community. Schools can play a central role in nurturing the mental health and well-being of refugee students, providing stability and helping them to overcome learning difficulties.

This information aims to help schools become more informed about the background and experiences of Sudanese students so that they can respond sensitively to their needs and create a supportive environment that will build their confidence and capabilities.

## Sudan: War and its Impact

Sudan is the largest country in Africa and shares borders with nine countries including Egypt, Chad, Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia. It is one of the world's poorest countries with extremely low health, social and economic indicators, especially in the south.

Since independence in 1956, Sudan has experienced almost continuous civil war between the government representing the mainly Arab, Muslim interests of the north and the diverse African ethnic groups of indigenous and Christian beliefs in the south. Life in the south of Sudan is very different to that of the north. Southern Sudanese people live mostly traditional, subsistence lifestyles centered around tending cattle or growing vegetables. Much of the land is pastoral and the roads unsealed. The limited infrastructure and services that once existed have been destroyed by the fighting, which mostly occurred in the south.

There is a severe shortage of schools and health clinics. People do not even have basic facilities such as electricity and running water.

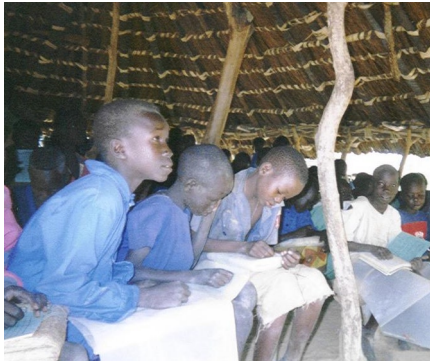
Since 1983, an estimated two million people have been killed and another four million people forced to flee their homes and villages. Along with recurrent drought and famine, the war has caused successive waves of displacement and had a devastating impact on family and community life. While all children were affected by the war, adolescents were particularly targeted. Many were forcibly recruited by government and rebel forces as child soldiers, sex slaves and laborers. A Peace Agreement signed in January 2005 hopefully marked an end to the conflict, although a separate conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan continues. A power-sharing constitution was signed in July 2005 allowing Southern Sudan a six year period of autonomy before holding a referendum on independence. The town of Rumbek has been chosen as the administrative capital of the south despite having no paved roads, a dirt airstrip and many destroyed buildings.



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# Education in Southern Sudan



Primary school in Southern Sudan (AET/UNICEF)

Historically, educational opportunities in Southern Sudan have been severely limited by poverty, government neglect, official intolerance of ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity and the cultural expectations of the community. Decades of war caused thousands of school-aged children to be deprived of basic education. Schools were destroyed and teachers and students were among the many refugees fleeing to safety. The few schools that were able to function were mostly run by volunteers who lacked adequate training or resources.

Primary schools were often no more than a group of children gathered under a tree or in derelict buildings. In their 2005 Report, the UN's Joint Assessment Mission for Sudan reported that an entire generation had missed out on education and the people of Southern

Sudan had the lowest access to primary education in the world.

Further statistics highlight the devastating impact on education:

- Of an estimated 1.4 million school age children (7-14 years) in Southern Sudan, less than 400,000 were enrolled in school at the end of 2003.
- About 500,000 girls (82% of all school-age girls) were out of school and less than 1% of girls completed primary education.
- High drop out rates meant that only 2% of students completed primary school.
- Only 6% of teachers had been formally trained and 45% had received limited in-service training.
- Adult literacy in Southern Sudan was only 24%, adult female literacy was 12% (adult literacy in Australia is 99.8%).
- Only 10% of schools were in permanent buildings and 80% of schoolchildren had no seat to sit on.
- Only 48% of schools had access to safe drinking water and 68% of schools had no toilet facilities.

References: [www.unsudanig.org/JAM](http://www.unsudanig.org/JAM)  
<http://www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2005/jam-sdn-18mar3.pdf>

## Barriers to Education in Southern Sudan also include:

- Disease and poor health
- Resistance to the government policy of using an Islamic curriculum delivered in Arabic
- The patriarchal nature of Sudanese society which favours male access to education while girls are often married at a young age and prepared for domestic and family duties
- The small percentage of female teachers provides few role models for girls
- Older children are often required for family and communal responsibilities, eg grazing cattle
- Living in rural and remote areas requires walking long distances to attend school
- Rudimentary facilities with difficult learning environments, eg no textbooks or writing materials
- Class sizes can be very large with children commonly sitting on the floor or dirt

References: <http://www.unsudanig.org/JAM/drafts/reports/social/education/education-assessment-exective-summary.doc>  
[http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/wl\\_sd.pdf](http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/wl_sd.pdf)

## People of Sudan: Languages, Ethnicity and Culture

- Sudan's population is around 35 million and the majority of Sudanese, around 78%, live in rural areas.
- Most people in Southern Sudan live in small huts and lead a subsistence lifestyle.
- Cattle form a central part of the livelihood and culture of many ethnic groups in the south.

### Ethnicity

- Sudan is very diverse with more than 400 different ethnic groups.
- The largest ethnic group comprises Arabic people who live mainly in the north.
- Southern Sudan comprises mainly indigenous African groups including the Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Bari and Azande.
- Sudanese groups in Victoria include the Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk and Bari.

### Language

- Arabic is Sudan's official language and spoken widely in the north, though a variant known as Sudanese Arabic is commonly used.
- Around 100 different languages are spoken in the south, major languages include Dinka, Nuer, Bari, Shilluk, Zande, Acholi and Madi.
- Many South Sudanese are multilingual, using Arabic as a second language and prefer to speak in their tribal language; an educated minority speak English.

### Religion

- An estimated 70% of the Sudanese population are Sunni Muslims; the remainder of the population hold traditional African beliefs or are Christian.
- Most Sudanese living in the south hold traditional beliefs or are Christian. Christians include Catholic, Anglican, Coptic and Evangelical communities. The majority of Sudanese who resettle in Australia come from the south.
- Sudanese entrants also include people from the north and other regions of Sudan, many of whom are Muslim.

<http://www.unsudanig.org/>  
[http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles\\_Kemp/sudanese\\_refugees.htm](http://www3.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/sudanese_refugees.htm)  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/country\\_profiles/820864.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/country_profiles/820864.stm)

# The Refugee Journey: Barriers to Education

Abraham explained to me that his first experience of primary schooling in Kakuma involved over 100 children sitting under a tree with a slate nailed to the trunk. Teachers here should not be surprised with what some describe as a “blank, mask-like response” to their gentle questions. (Hillier A, 2002)

War, displacement and separation from family and community have severely disrupted education for Sudanese students. Refugee arrivals to Australia from Africa have generally completed fewer years of schooling than those from Asia and Europe. Most Sudanese refugees who come to Australia have first sought refuge in the surrounding countries of Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia or Egypt. Others have come via other surrounding countries. Many young people have spent prolonged peri-

ods of time in refugee camps or amongst the local population of the host country with limited access to education. Young Sudanese may have little knowledge or experience of their native country, its culture and traditions. Though camp conditions vary, characteristics of camp life include cramped living areas, dependence on relief aid, inadequate food and medical supplies, lack of water and sanitation facilities and vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. There is often

a high level of violence in the camps. A number of camps are located in areas of ongoing conflict. Education facilities are limited and programs are often run by refugee relief agencies. The curriculum and language of delivery usually follows that of the host country. The ratio of girls attending school is low, often due to traditional cultural expectations which emphasise their domestic role and early marriage in order to provide dowry for the family.

## Egypt

- Thousands of Sudanese refugees have sought UNHCR protection in Egypt, however it can take years to process the applications of those who seek resettlement.
- Most refugees live in substandard housing in urban areas as there are no refugee camps.
- The school curriculum is offered in Arabic.
- Many children do not attend school due to the difficulty in accessing overcrowded Egyptian public schools.
- Many refugees cannot afford the cost of tuition, transportation, uniforms, food.
- Children are often required to stay home and look after their siblings while parents go to work.
- Many children are reluctant to attend school due to experiences of harassment, prejudice and intimidation.



## Uganda

- In 2003 there were around 200,000 Sudanese refugees living in Uganda, with thousands more arriving that year.
- Many continue to live in camps and settlements in northern Uganda, eg in Adjumani district there are around 40 designated settlements with some access to farmland.
- Others live as urban refugees in towns and in the capital, Kampala.
- Schools in refugee settlements follow the Ugandan national curriculum based on a 7 year primary program and classes are mainly taught in English.
- Primary schools often charge fees that refugees cannot afford.
- Relief organizations often organize school feeding programs to support children to attend classes regularly.
- Many of the refugees are forced to live in areas vulnerable to attack by rebel groups and thousands of children are forced to commute long distances at night to avoid kidnapping and forced military recruitment.

## Kenya

- In 2003 most of the 60,000 refugees lived in Kakuma refugee camps which were established in 1992 in remote northwest Kenya.
- Most refugees had lived in Kakuma for 7-10 years.
- Other refugees found refuge in towns or poor urban areas of the capital, Nairobi.
- Education programs are offered in the camps as part of refugee assistance but have limited resources.
- Education programs tend to follow the Kenyan curriculum and English is the language of instruction in Kenya.
- In 2002 more than 23,000 refugee students attended 21 primary schools and 3000 students attended secondary and vocational schools.



# Background Issues that may Impact on Learning in Australian Schools

Most newly arrived Sudanese students attend English language schools where they receive intensive language tuition before they progress to mainstream primary or secondary schools. Some students enrol directly into mainstream schools. Sudanese highly value education and its universal access in Australia, however schools and teaching practices may be very different to their experiences of education. The following table provides brief information on issues that may affect a student's adjustment and learning capabilities in school.

<b>Language and Communication</b>
Most Sudanese students need to learn English when they arrive.
Sudanese are linguistically diverse and often speak 2 or 3 languages other than English.
Arabic, the official language of Sudan, is the most common according to settlement data, however it is often the second language for many South Sudanese.
The Dinka and Nuer are the largest language groups represented in Australia; other languages include Bari, Shilluk, Acholi, Kakwa, Bassa, Lokoya, Loppit and Madi.
Students who attended school in refugee camps were taught in the language and curriculum offered in their camp; in Egypt children were educated in Arabic.
Difficulties in language and communication may cause withdrawn or aggressive behaviour.
<b>Literacy and Numeracy</b>
Literacy rates may be very low and students may not be literate in their first or any language.
Education level of Sudanese students may be lower than that of their age group.
Reading and writing from right to left will be natural for those literate in Arabic.
Students may feel anxiety about their inability to read or write.
<b>Learning and Development</b>
Students may be unfamiliar with teaching style and methods, eg students are more accustomed to an instructional approach with strict discipline compared to an approach which encourages independent thinking and questioning and may be reluctant to question or interact with the teacher.
Students who have had little experience of education may lack formal learning skills, fine motor skills and require attention to pre-writing skills; they may also lack familiarity with classroom equipment and activities.
Students may have difficulties in adjusting to the classroom environment and classroom routines.
<b>Culture and Family</b>
Sudanese families tend to be large and comprise extended family members, therefore it is important not to treat families as nuclear units; this can impact on family involvement in school, access to resources, family responsibilities.
Traditionally men can marry more than one wife, however often only one wife will come to Australia, therefore children may not be living with their biological mother.
There may be little time, space and family support for students to do homework as they may be expected to help with home duties and not have access to an English speaker or a desk/computer.
Many Sudanese come from rural areas or refugee camps and may be unfamiliar with urban environments and the facilities/amenities we take for granted.
Cross –cultural tensions may occur as a result of changing roles and expectations, eg in Australia, Sudanese children are often described as having more freedom and women afforded more rights than in Sudan.
Parents with limited experiences of education may give educational responsibility to the teacher rather than see education as a partnership between families and school.
Disciplinary practices vary between Australia and Sudan, eg Sudanese students may be accustomed to physical punishment which is banned from schools in Victoria; they may be confused by old and new ways of discipline.
Students are accustomed to listening to their elders and showing respect by not looking in their eyes, therefore students may lower their heads when being spoken to and their lack of response may be confused with ignoring rather than respecting the teacher.

The Impact of Trauma
Students may suffer specific effects as a result of their refugee experiences including anxiety, fear, distrust, sleeplessness, low confidence and self esteem and sensitivity to failure. Hypervigilance, withdrawal and other emotional and behavioural problems may be a result of their traumatic experiences. These will affect their capacity for learning and integration with the school. Strategies for teachers to address the impact of trauma and promote recovery are provided in <i>School's In for Refugees</i> (see VFST Resources).
Health, Well-being and Nutrition
Students may be accustomed to a very different diet and eating habits and may be unfamiliar with school eating routines and the type and quantity of food in Australia.
Health problems, or medications used for them, may affect their concentration.
Students may be unfamiliar with health services in Australia, eg not used to visiting a GP.
Many health issues, particularly reproductive health, are not openly discussed.
Settlement Issues
Financial stress associated with resettlement, eg many families will be financially supporting relatives overseas. Sudanese who have come on a Special Humanitarian Program visa (202) do not have the same supports as those who come under the refugee category and may have large travel debts.
Lack of familiarity with transport, timetables and local geography.
Difficulties in accessing services including health, education and other support services.

## Resettlement in Australia: Opportunities and Barriers to Education

Sudanese refugees in Australia are mostly from Southern Sudan and have come on a Refugee or Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) visa under Australia's Offshore Humanitarian program.

Selection of refugees for resettlement is guided by UNHCR assessments of the refugee situation around the world. Current priorities include applicants from Africa, the Middle East and South West Asia, particularly those in camps, in need of physical and legal protection and vulnerable individuals. Refugees chosen for resettlement in Australia are usually

identified and referred by UNHCR, although some refugees directly apply for resettlement through UNHCR or Australian consular offices. Sudanese people who enter Australia under other migrant categories, or who apply for asylum after reaching Australia, cannot access the range of entitlements and services offered to those who enter under the Offshore Humanitarian program. These limitations place further burdens on their resettlement in Australia. It is therefore helpful to understand the migration status of Sudanese people



Primary schools in South Sudan  
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living in Australia and how it affects their access to services and support.

Australian Humanitarian Program	
<b>Refugee visas 200, 201, 203, 204</b> For people who are subject to persecution, forced to live outside their country and assessed to be UNHCR refugees and in need of resettlement. From 2004-05, 6000 places are offered annually under this category.	The Australian government pays for the costs associated with processing and travel to Australia. These entrants are eligible for government services and access to the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS). These services include English language instruction, needs-determined accommodation support, settlement support, Centrelink benefits, early health assessment and short-term torture and trauma counseling.
<b>Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) visa 202</b> For people living outside their home country who are subject to discrimination amounting to gross violation of their human rights in their home country. In 2004-05, 7000 places were allocated for the SHP and onshore categories.	Applications must be supported by a Proposer (an Australian citizen, permanent resident or organization). The Proposer is also expected to assist the applicant and any dependents in meeting the costs of travel and initial resettlement. These entrants are also eligible for IHSS services (see above). Many Sudanese in Australia act as Proposers to support family and community members to come to Australia. However many find it very difficult to meet the financial and other obligations of a Proposer in addition to their own resettlement demands.

# Supporting Refugee Students in Schools

The following are brief guidelines to help schools promote a supportive environment for refugee students and their families. They are adapted from the VFST publication, *School's In for Refugees: Whole School Guide to Refugee Readiness* (2004) available on the web: [www.foundationhouse.org.au](http://www.foundationhouse.org.au).

1. **A whole school approach** will help to ensure the school's policies, values and curriculum are inclusive and can practically support refugee students. This includes a welcoming enrolment process, the ability to identify refugee students and assess their needs, sensitive transition and orientation programs, strengthening relationships between students, staff and parents, the provision of interpreters, Multicultural Education Aides and translated information.
2. **Professional development** for staff to raise their awareness of refugee issues, including how schools can promote recovery from trauma and implement strategies to address barriers to learning.
3. **A classroom environment** that is safe, provides stability, is engaging and stimulating, in which there are clear expectations, positive reinforcement and the capacity to

identify and refer students at-risk. Teaching styles that are flexible, non-confrontational and inclusive. Teaching strategies that meet the needs of the student and include activities appropriate to student's skills.

4. **School curriculum and programs** that are supportive of refugee students and increase understanding of refugee issues within the school including ways to promote harmony, diversity and social connectedness, as well as ESL programs that support literacy and numeracy development and language learning across the curriculum.
5. **Partnerships with parents** by establishing good communication with families to help them understand the education system in Australia, the role played by teachers and the expectations on students.
6. **Partnerships with agencies** outside the school to access support, advice and resources that are important in responding adequately to the complex needs faced by refugee students.



Photo by McKenzie & Assoc, VFST

Other VFST publications to assist schools include: *Taking Action: Human Rights and Refugee Issues* (2005), *Healthwise: Health Literacy Teaching Resource for Refugee and Other ESL Students* (2004), *Rainbow Program for Children in Refugee Families* (2002), *Kaleidoscope Program in A Guide to Working with Young People who are Refugees* (2000). Also available in Term 1, 2006 will be *Klassroom Kaleidoscope*. Resources available at: [www.foundationhouse.org.au](http://www.foundationhouse.org.au).

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