

# **Inspiring Communities: Research and Action with Refugee Youth**

The Centre of International Mental Health and the Faculty of Arts,  
University of Melbourne

24 May 2012

Summary Report

## Introduction

On 24<sup>th</sup> May 2012 a discussion forum and workshop was hosted by the Centre for International Mental Health and the Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne. The workshop explored how insight and understanding developed by service providers and the hard-won knowledge of refugee communities can come together with academic research to support good settlement outcomes for refugee youth in Australia.

The discussion forum was conceived and developed by Associate Professor Harry Minas, from the Centre for International Mental Health, University of Melbourne, and Dr Arnold Zable, acclaimed writer and Vice-Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Melbourne, with support from Dr Sara Wills, Faculty of Arts, and members of staff of the Centre for International Mental Health. The forum brought together researchers, practitioners, activists and young people from refugee backgrounds to reflect on the achievements of recent initiatives to assist refugee youth, and also to consider what further research and action is needed to assist young people to settle and flourish in Australia.



## Programme

Welcome and introduce the Vice Chancellor, Professor Glyn Davis by Arnold Zable

Opening presentation by Professor Glyn Davis

### Session 1

Chair: Dr. Arnold Zable

- Madeline Valibhoy - Foundation House
- Berhan Ahmed – African Think Tank
- Waleed Musa - RISE
- Courtney Green and Ubah Badi - ASRC
- Nyadol Nyuon - Former refugee
- John Mahoney – Deputising for Harry Minas

Q & A session

### Session 2

Chair: Dr. Sara Wills

- David Nguyen, Dave Kelman, Maki Issa, Soloman Salew, and Abraham Herasan – Flemington Theatre project
- Catherine Simmonds – ASRC theatre Project
- Soo-Lin Quek – Centre for Multicultural Youth
- Celia McMichael – Good Starts project

Q & A session

### Final session “Where to from here?”

Chair: Dr. Arnold Zable & Dr. John Mahoney

Acknowledgements

Reception

## Session Summaries

The seminar began with a welcome by Dr Arnold Zable, acclaimed writer and currently Vice-Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Melbourne. The Vice Chancellor, *Professor Glyn Davis* spoke about the rise in student interest in the area of migrant issues and studies. He acknowledged the presence of colleagues engaging in this topic, from a variety of disciplines and organizations (e.g., Asylum Seekers Resource Centre, Centre for multicultural youth, RISE, Centre for the Survivors of Torture). Professor Davis drew attention to the importance of youth mental health. He highlighted organizations such as *The Dax Centre*<sup>1</sup> as providing a forum for recovery from mental health issues through the arts.



In the presentation that followed, *Dr Zable* acknowledged that there is great deal of work being done on refugee youth. In particular he highlighted the work done by Martin Culkin – former Principal at Dandenong High School, Chantelle Higgs at the Flemington Legal Centre, and by community liaison officer Sen-Constable Ash Dixit, founder of the Maribyrnong African Youth Advancement Committee whose main goal is to help people from African backgrounds procure a job or apprenticeship.. He mentioned that although a great deal of knowledge has been accumulated in the area of refugee youth, there is a difficulty in knowing where to go next. He then outlined the purpose of the day's event: to share knowledge and develop a network of researchers and activists in the field and develop a shared vision of the way forward in terms of improved collaboration, more focused research and better approaches in meeting the needs.



### Session 1: The Importance of Knowledge and Communication

*Dr Madeline Valibhoy*, a clinical psychologist and research fellow at Foundation House<sup>2</sup> spoke of her ongoing research on the experiences of young refugees with mental health services. She spoke of a previous project looking at service providers' perspectives in what works and what doesn't in engaging young people in service provision. She outlined her current research project looking at young people's (aged 18-25 years) experiences as consumers of mental health services. Despite refugee youth experiencing more mental health problems than



<sup>1</sup> The Cunningham Dax Collection has over 15,000 creative works by people with experience of mental illness or psychological trauma.  
<http://www.daxcentre.org/collection/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/>

non-refugee peers, and showing a lower uptake of psychological services, this is a topic that has not been previously researched in the Australian context. Although the research project is still in the early stages of development, preliminary findings show that there are a number of contributing factors to service use. These include stigma, familial and societal factors.

The next speaker was *Dr Berhan Ahmed*, a leading refugee advocate for the African community and Chairperson of the African think tank at Melbourne University<sup>3</sup>. He spoke about the African think tank being established after a gap in knowledge about African issues in Australia was acknowledged. He spoke of a need to educate mainstream Australians about African issues. He cited education and employment as being central to better integrating the African community into Australian culture. In terms of settlement and integration, he said that African refugees have much to offer the Australian community. This can be overlooked when many young refugees are moved straight into housing commission flats, which can be highly stigmatizing and make it



difficult for them to find opportunities to integrate into the wider community (e.g., education and work). He said that while there are people who design employment opportunities for African Australians, they do not consult African Australians as to how this employment would best work to suit African-Australians. He concluded by saying that research and knowledge can help to empower and give opportunities for young refugees. The African think tank was created to try and breach refugee community understanding with mainstream understanding. Policy makers need to understand the real social challenges people are facing in our streets.

*Waleed Musa*, from RISE<sup>4</sup>, an organization run by refugees, ex-detainees and asylum seekers, established in 2009. Waleed spoke about the history and current initiatives of the organization. RISE was the first organization in Australia run by people who have come to Australia as refugees themselves. As such, all projects instigated by the Centre are influenced by peoples' own –first hand and collective knowledge. By way of helping refugees and asylum seekers build new lives in Australia, RISE provides support services and acts as a mediator between NGO and governmental programs. In addition to this, RISE has an arts/music program, dedicated to reducing social isolation by engaging youth in different forms of artistic expression. Through this program, young people are given a forum to express themselves rather than having other people dictate

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.att.org.au/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://riserefugee.org/>

how they should express themselves. Examples of these forums include poetry workshops and hip hop programs. These are designed to educate, motivate and inspire young people. Above all these programs are designed to empower young people to become leaders in their own communities.

The next speaker, *Courtney Green*, a social and community development coordinator at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC)<sup>5</sup> discussed about the importance of social connectedness. One of the key functions of the ASRC is to create pathways for members to be more connected to a community. Courtney highlighted the importance of social networking forums like Facebook for achieving social connectedness. She said that all programs conducted by the ASRC work within a participatory framework to engage people in activities that they want to do and listen to what members actually want. She provided two examples of programs developed in consultation with the community: 1) a mentor program, which aimed to match refugee youth up to a member of the community so that mentors can connect mentees with the community; and 2) a soccer team with young men from different backgrounds with significant mental health problems. According to Courtney, these programs improve mental and spiritual wellbeing by fostering a sense of team spirit and giving people opportunities to connect with the wider Melbourne community.

*Ubah Badi*, a student at the Kangan Institute<sup>6</sup>, studying for a double degree in community development, spoke about her own experience in coming to Australia. Since her arrival 4 years ago, she said that she has taught herself English and developed a drumming group. The drumming group provides her with a place to go one day a week with familiar faces. She was involved in working with theatre director Catherine



Simmonds and fellow asylum seekers and refugees in developing a project called “Journey of Asylum - waiting”, which was staged in 2010. This led to a second theatre project called “Not Just My Story” which was staged in 2011. In the second project, she became a mentor to around 30 people. She has since gone on to become a community support worker and is now doing a community diploma.

Former refugee, *Nyadol Nyoun*, now a law student at Melbourne University, spoke eloquently of the struggle of young refugees for a sense of identity and belonging as African Australians. She spoke of the limitations of current research, saying that it often ignores the kind of future refugee youth are looking for in Australia. Future research should inform meaningful outcomes for young people and involve young people from refugee backgrounds who are at university. She read two articles she has written which

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<sup>5</sup> [www.asrc.org.au/](http://www.asrc.org.au/)

<sup>6</sup> [www.kangan.edu.au/](http://www.kangan.edu.au/)

describe her own search for her identity. In them she describes being born and raised in refugee camps in various countries in Africa, and in 2005 being resettled in Australia. She describes having to navigate multiple identities and find her own voice. Among the many interesting themes raised by Nyadol's articles was the issue of labeling. Specifically one article highlighted the fact that the labels such as 'refugee' can sometimes limit the aspirations that young people have for their lives.

*Dr John Mahoney*, from the Centre for International Mental Health<sup>7</sup>, provided a brief overview of international perspectives on the issues surrounding refugee youth, citing his work in mental health system development in Sri Lanka, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon. He described multiple barriers to obtaining mental health services, particularly from the refugee communities, saying that if people are not using the services, the services have got it wrong. There is a need to go out to where people are. He mentioned the research (on mental health) that is available (including focus group discussions with refugees themselves) showed the highest priorities in term of further research were:



- Determinants of mental health and illness
- Cultural concepts of mental health, illness and help-seeking
- Effective models of mental health service delivery
- Appropriate and effective treatment methods

The broad pattern of priorities was the same for adults, and children and youth.

He concluded by saying that he has worked in many disaster and war zones, and has always been struck by the resilience of the people involved in these situations. Initially everyone is in a state of shock but over time over 90% of people can and do recover. The key is in identifying and supporting those who do not.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.cimh.unimelb.edu.au/](http://www.cimh.unimelb.edu.au/)

## Session 2: The Power of Art to Engage, to Share, to Connect, and to Heal...

Following a short break *Dr Sarah Wills* introduced *Dave Kelman*, director of the Flemington Theatre Group, and his colleague, *David Nguyen*. Their community theatre group works with newly arrived communities<sup>8</sup>. *Dave Kelman* spoke about community arts and working with refugee and migrant communities. He spoke about refugee narratives being the foundation of many community arts practices in Australia. How do the



participants in these projects transcend the title of refugees? How do they make old and new meanings with and for their community? There should be a commitment to long term sustainability in terms of making improvements to the community. It is important to involve young people in this process. The younger the better, primary school kids are a great place to start, but continue to work with them throughout and after high school. There is a need to work with communities at multiple levels and for cultural leaders to be mentors themselves. With many newly arrived communities, there is a lack of role models within the public sphere, media, etc. The development of role models and cultural leaders is at the core in how you develop a sense of community in young people.

*David Nguyen* then spoke about the research side of their community theatre project. Their model was of a research project with a theatre group that developed over a number of years (He first started working there 2004). He said that research had moved the group forward, documenting a community theatre process, with interviews and observation, feeding the data back to them blow by blow. Through the research, they developed an understanding of the process they were working in. Although the model of research is often to take notes and then leave, he asked, what are we supposed to do with the data? The aim is participatory research. Through this process, refugee youth become effective artistic leaders in their community. Theatre should be a dialogue about what's going on. The theatre has so much to teach society about the voices of those marginalized in society. It is an art of social engagement. Something that came out strongly in the research was a lack of a story – the only stories relevant for African Australian communities are based on American culture, which are mostly negative and not relevant.

*Maki Issa* talked about research and how it brought back a little bit of trust in the research community. Research was taken back and forth between the communities, which therefore enabled everyone's voices to be heard. The Theatre Company was established 6 years ago not only to tell peoples stories, but also to advocate and educate. The number one thing that people like about their theatre group is that the theatre company is based in Flemington – not in a fancy place in the city. It also resonates with people because they are telling the stories of

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.westernedge.org.au/flemington-theatre-group-black-skin-white-mask/>



the people in their community. We develop stories based on issues occurring in the community, and what's important in the community at the time.

*Soloman Salew* spoke of theatre works at a number of levels. Firstly, they operate by being true to who they are, and telling their stories in an honest light. Actual stories + cultural stories = community representations. There is an intimacy in performing to actors' own communities in which people say things in the theatre that they want to say in real life. Secondly there is a cultural narrative. Whoever is in the venue can find their own narrative in the show. *Abraham Herasan* said that theatre builds bridges across stereotypes that show stories of young Africans and in his case Afghan experiences. The aim is to bring awareness to the issues that they're going through in actual life, but also putting a positive light on current issues. For example: in portraying Islam in such a way as to break down misconceptions and stereotypes.

*Catherine Simmonds*, a freelance artistic director, involved in the ASRC theatre project spoke of the great therapeutic value of the project which emphasized the role of art as an agent of social change. It gave asylum seekers an opportunity to tell their own stories and to speak out in their own words. It was a life-changing project which increased awareness and showed the transformative effect of community arts projects. Catherine spoke about theatre as a human language which combines the experience of body, spirit and mind. The Arts try to open the space of trust in telling asylum seekers' stories. Therapeutic work can happen within the theatre medium. "What you've experienced in your life – people in the theatre can learn from this." How do you create a space between people that is active, and meaningful (when there are many systems involved in refugees), the arts can act as a bridge over this gap.

*Soo-Lin Quek*, a policy and research manager from the *Centre for Multicultural Youth*<sup>9</sup> reflected upon their many programs seeking to engage with young people. Their pilot Refugee Youth Support Service aims to provide accommodation for unaccompanied minors, who are without a guardian to transition into independent living. She has run a number of group programs to support services for better engagement practices with young people.

*Dr Celia McMichael*<sup>10</sup> talked about the Good Starts study, a research project on resettlement outcomes for young people from refugee backgrounds. The study involved 120 young people recruited from English language schools. It is a 4-year longitudinal study which uses a variety of methods including interviews, surveys, photos, and so forth. The study highlights the importance of education in refugee youth. It has been found that the more the young people reported they rated they belonged to the wider Australian community the higher they rated their wellbeing.

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<sup>9</sup> [www.cmy.net.au/](http://www.cmy.net.au/)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/about/staff/profile?uname=CMCMICHAEL>



### *Panel discussion*

- Many people expressed interest in reading Nyadol's articles and it was agreed these would be circulated.
- There were comments on the meaning of "conscious hip-hop", where it was noted that policing has come up as an issue quite regularly. Discussing this in the forum of hip-hop allows people to open up a bit more. It also provides practical advice for people who need assistance in dealing with complaints about the police.
- It was felt there was 'Consultation fatigue': consultations after consultations that do not result in outcomes are difficult for people to engage with. Having an outcome brings people to trust the organization. Also the same people are consulted over and over again. Suggestions for how to overcome this: hire people to run consultations from refugee and asylum seekers backgrounds; approach communities with the same level of detail and information as you would your funders and work with various local organisations including places of worship and women's' groups to access people.
- There was discussion on what leads to resilience? Interpersonal interaction, knowing your weaknesses and working on them (e.g. English language difficulties), traditional family structures, a really good group of friends, brutal honesty, sheer perseverance (meaning not accepting limitations imposed by others) were some of the approaches mentioned
- We need to examine ways to break down barriers between Institutions and communities and identify gaps between services In terms of theatre (Theatre Q) – we need to establish ways to move this kind of activity into the mainstream. It was mentioned that Flemington community theatre will be performing at the

Malthouse – hopefully a sustainable relationship. Flemington community theatre is a model of communal art and therefore communal society – it is a challenge to the basis of the mainstream art. “We want to speak, not to be spoken for”. The television programme *Go back to where you came from* is an attempt at bringing the refugee story to the mainstream.

- It was felt that the Australian media seems to be much more aggressive than other countries. It was agreed we as a group need to start working with the press/media to help change their language around these issues.
- In response to a question about broadening representation, The Flemington Theatre Group mentioned they had started to do exchange programs with other ethnic groups, and to work on strategies to become a broader group.
- There was a comment “Does uniqueness need to be protected”? Further discussion was needed on how much do you integrate this uniqueness into the resettlement environment,

### *The Way Forward for Research and Action with Refugee Youth*

There are many people conducting research and activities into the many issues regarding refugee youth, but the information is not being shared. There is a need for a virtual network of individuals and organisations to actively engage, share information and form collaborations. CIMH can facilitate the development of such a network but the purpose, functions and governance of the network should be determined by its members.

Some specific suggestions for the way forward include:

- Develop a network to continue the discussions among the seminar participants
- Given the scale of the needs, ongoing discussion is needed about what the priorities of this network should be.
- Start advocating, developing our own plans and forming our own group.
- Strengthen partnerships between the communities, academia and the various organisations involved, both nationally and internationally.
- Focus on the distinct needs of young women and men and the nature of the difficult work in building communities.
- The virtual network, or a different platform (e.g., a hub) could be established to bring together academic staff and students across the various universities in

Melbourne conducting innovative and meaningful research and engaging with communities.

- -There should be more seminars or forums, but perhaps with a focus on specific topics. Eg. The arts and refugee youth and mental health and better services for refugee youth

A Summary of the seminar will be developed and circulated to all participants.. These organisations and individuals will be the beginnings of the Network which will be expanded over time. A small Working Group will be formed to initiate the development of the network and people/organisations will be asked to put forward their names if they wished to be involved.

A separate brief survey will be circulated to begin this process.

### **Acknowledgements**

- The Vice Chancellor and the University of Melbourne for hosting the Seminar
- Harry Minas, Arnold Zable, and Sara Wills for organizing the seminar
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- Staff of the Centre for International Mental Health, University of Melbourne, for assisting with the organisation of the seminar and for drafting this report.

**An Article by Dr Arnold Zable in the VOICE**

<http://voice.unimelb.edu.au/volume-8/number-6/forum-refugee-youth-challenge-us-all>



## **Forum on Refugee youth: A challenge for us all**

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Photo: Casamento Photography

**Melbourne Vice-Chancellor's Fellow and author Arnold Zable reviews his experience meeting with members of Melbourne's refugee community in an interdisciplinary forum to discuss the challenges facing young refugees.**

In the 1840s, a journalist travelling through Ireland noticed the people's lips were green. They were green from their diet of grass. In a time of severe famine there was little else to eat. Out of a population of 8 million, over one million died, and one and a half million boarded boats in search of new lives. Australia was one of their destinations, with the added lure by the 1850s of the gold rushes.

With the exception of Indigenous peoples, we are a nation of boat people whose forebears made the journey from elsewhere to our shores. How we assist

succeeding generations in adjusting to their new country is one of the measures of Australia's maturity and well-being as a nation.

This is an apt context within which to place the seminar, Inspiring Communities: Research and Action with Refugee Youth, held at Melbourne University in May. The initiative arose when the head of the University's Centre of International Mental Health, Associate Professor Harry Minas, told me of the extensive research undertaken in the University on issues affecting refugee youth.

We decided to convene a forum that would bring together researchers, refugees and their communities, NGOs, activists and service providers, to explore and strengthen the links between these groups. Our concern was to find ways of translating research into productive action. We aimed to open the University doors to people who have been actively engaged with these challenges in the community.

There are many innovative programs focused on refugee youth already out there. Sara Wills, an Associate Dean in the Arts Faculty, joined us and the forum expanded to become a joint venture across several faculties.

The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Glyn Davis agreed to open the forum, and in his address welcomed the wide range of participants. Waleed Musa, from RISE, an organisation run by refugees, ex-detainees and asylum seekers, spoke of the innovative programs the centre has developed to engage with fellow refugee youths, and have their voices heard. Former refugee, Nyadol Nyoun, now a law student at Melbourne University, spoke eloquently of the struggle of young refugees for a sense of identity and belonging as African Australians.

Refugee Ubah Badi joined Courtney Greene of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, and community theatre director, Catherine Simmonds, to talk of the Centre's recent theatre productions and programs that have helped create a home away from home for dislocated asylum seeker youth. Head of Melbourne University's African Think Tank, Dr Berhan Ahmed, focused on the challenges refugees face in moving from communal societies to the more institutional societies of the West.

Actor, director and playwright, David Nguyen, and researcher and theatre educator Dr Dave Kelman, discussed their unique Western Edge Youth Arts project, and their ongoing work with the Flemington Youth Theatre. Their focus has been on training young people with refugee backgrounds as artistic leaders within their own communities, as well as developing their theatre skills. They were joined by actor Maki Issa, an emerging leader in the Horn of Africa community, and by his fellow actors Solomon Salew and Abraham Herasan.

The trio spoke inspiringly of the inclusive process by which they have devised their plays. Their scripts were first performed within the Flemington Housing Commission estates, and they have been invited to perform their latest play, Black Face, White Mask, at the Malthouse Theatre.

Soo-Lin Quek from the Centre for Multicultural Youth reflected upon its many programs seeking to engage with young people. Its pilot Refugee Youth Support Service aims to provide accommodation for unaccompanied minors, who are without a guardian to assist their transition into independent living. Madeleine Valibhoy, a Research Fellow at Foundation House, spoke of her ongoing research on the experiences of young refugees with mental health services.

Dr Celia McMichael reviewed her research on the Good Starts program, a collaborative venture between the La Trobe University Research Centre and Foundation House, that focuses on the well-being of refugee youth, while Dr John Mahoney, from the Centre of International Mental Health, provided a global perspective.

The forum concluded with a discussion of a network that would enable the participants to stay in touch with each other, and with the research and many other initiatives discussed at the forum.

The challenges faced by refugee youth are formidable. All too many continue to feel isolated, alienated, and on the margins of society. Others have, with sheer hard work, attained much in a short period of time. Their achievements are exemplified by Nyadol Nyoun who dreamt of studying law as a child in a refugee village. At 23 she has attained that goal. She spoke with a sense of urgency. Nothing is taken for granted. Each day counts. When opportunities come they are cherished. There is much that we can learn from this attitude to life.