

# Early experiences of young Sudanese resettled to Finland

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**It has been a challenge for many young Sudanese to navigate Finnish education, traditions and habits, and for their families to make the journey with them.**

Young Sudanese, both Christians and Muslims, arrived in Finland under the government's quota system between 2001 and 2004, some with their family or other relatives and some on their own.

Though many young Sudanese had not in fact lived in Sudan, in the early stages of resettlement many considered themselves Sudanese and had a strong sense of Sudanese identity. Some young people had lived in Khartoum but many had lived outside Sudan – for example, in Egypt – for much of their life. Only a few had personal experience of living in South Sudan and being involved in the civil war but at least one had been a child slave in Sudan. Even for those southern Sudanese youth who had not experienced the civil war personally, the conflict was part of their life through the experiences of their parents, relatives and friends. Those who had lived in an IDP camp in Khartoum had seen or experienced poverty, malnutrition or mistreatment from officials.

In addition, traumatised and alienated adults had created a living environment where alcohol and mental problems were present in some young people's lives directly or indirectly. The conflict in Sudan, racism and difficult living circumstances in different countries had left scars and distrust in young people's minds. For those who had lived in Sudan, the positive images of Sudan included friends, relatives and their home environment.

Many Sudanese adults and some young people over 15 years of age who were being resettled had participated in a cultural orientation course provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) before coming to Finland. The course was not designed particularly for young Sudanese but did give the youth, parents and relatives of young people a chance to discuss issues related to young people in Finland. These issues included, for example, dating the opposite sex, young people living on their own and Finnish-Sudanese cultural differences in adult-child relationships.

Topics that amazed and worried young Sudanese before travelling to Finland were, among others, the cold weather, snow, and the sun not setting and not rising during some periods of the year. They had also wondered how they would manage at school when they could not speak any Finnish, and whether the Finns, who are known as quiet people, would evict them from their homes as, in their own words, Sudanese were so loud. And one girl explained that after arriving in a small country town surrounded by forest, she had not slept at all for the first two nights as she was afraid bears would break into the house.

## At school in Finland

Even though many parents knew very little about Finland when they were offered resettlement, they had accepted the placement for the sake of a better future for their children. Many parents considered it a duty for Sudanese youth to contribute to Finnish society through achieving a good education and a job in Finland. Adults held doctors, lawyers and engineers in very high respect but their ambitions for their children to become equally highly educated proved in many cases unrealistic. Finland has one of the highest levels of education in the world and learning starts at a very early age. Many Sudanese children in Finland were doing well at kindergarten and primary school and some youth who had had a low level of education when they arrived in Finland were able to do well in a Finnish school. However, for many secondary school-age young persons who had not had schooling before or had studied for a few years only, higher education was proving inaccessible. And actually obtaining a place in school was problematic for those young people who had passed the age of compulsory education in Finland (the year a person becomes 17 years old) and yet who had studied for only a short period of time or had not studied at all.

Many Sudanese children and youth started school in Finland in preparatory classes which they attended for from half a year to a year, concentrating on Finnish language and basic school skills. Whenever possible, they were integrated into classes with Finnish children in subjects like physical education and art. Later, the aim was to integrate the immigrant child into a regular class in all subjects. There are also special classes held in some schools for children who cannot be integrated to preparatory or regular classes due to their lack of reading and writing skills.

In addition, lack of awareness about how to study and the importance of homework and hard work caused problems at school. And for many, learning things like dimensions, volumes and time were difficult in Finnish when they had not been taught them in their own language first. For Finnish children, doing a jigsaw puzzle is familiar from an early age, whereas doing a jigsaw puzzle can be impossible for a young person who has never done one in his/her childhood. There was evidence that some Sudanese youth suffered from diminishing self-esteem when they noticed that younger Finnish children were way ahead in skills and knowledge. Early on this then diminished their interest in education, caused withdrawal and created concentration problems in class for some of them.

Finnish kindergartens and schools were not familiar with working with young Sudanese, although there

was some experience of working with illiterate or poorly educated children from elsewhere. Most teachers, community workers and officials had no or very little knowledge of Sudan, the Sudanese way of life and about the experiences Sudanese refugees had due to fleeing Sudan.

### Culture and fashion

Finnish young people are very aware of how they look. To be accepted, some Sudanese youth had started to follow fashion with their hip-hop trousers and shirts showing their midriff. This had not pleased families who liked their children to wear more traditional clothes.

The language of Finnish young people caused problems at school. Until Sudanese young people understood that swearing and name-calling were a common way of communicating among young Finns, there had been hurt feelings and conflicts with them. Sudanese youth also wondered why some Finns do not greet them out in the street, a custom they were used to in their own communities. Those Sudanese who had become friends with Finns spent their free time together, for example in church activities. Sudanese youth often described their Finnish friends as being nicer than their friends in previous displacement countries but very quiet.

Sometimes adults' traumatic experiences of conflict and displacement and their own difficulties in settling into Finnish society were reflected on young people who often understood the Finnish language and the rules of Finnish society faster than adults. Just like Finnish young people, some Sudanese youth may also have tricked parents over where they were going in the evenings; in the beginning parents did not know that libraries were not open at night so the library was a good excuse when a teenager wanted to spend the night at a party. Sudanese girls followed the traditional Sudanese rules of behaviour more than boys, and families restricted girls' movement more than that of boys. Generational and cultural differences presented themselves in some cases when a young person became 18 and wanted to move out of the family home even when the family was resisting.

### Future prospects

It can be very difficult for immigrants to find employment in Finland. For young adults without practical skills, schooling or Finnish language skills, it was very rare to find any type of employment except for short-term internships. After compulsory education or at the stage where young adults had passed the age of compulsory education, in the first few years in Finland some Sudanese young people applied for vocational training. Some had passed the tests and received a training placement. Unfortunately not all young people were able to achieve placements, and thus in the first years there was a fairly high risk of social exclusion.

A few young persons wanted to become doctors, teachers and engineers just like their parents wished them to. There were some who recognised that their skills would not be enough to pursue an academic career and preferred to have a profession that did not require a lot of studying – but young people

were often surprised to learn that you needed some level of schooling or a certificate for any job at all. Before coming to Finland, some boys had thought they could do the same sort of job without schooling as in Egypt, for example changing car tyres.

Parents and families of young Sudanese were hoping that the younger generation would learn Finnish and eventually acquire Finnish nationality. Even after South Sudan became independent, many southern Sudanese parents found the idea of permanent return to South Sudan difficult, as there were no guarantees there of good schooling and health care for their family. However, families did hope that their young people would return to Sudan or South Sudan for visits so they would be able to learn about their roots, speak their native language and meet relatives. Some young people expressed an interest in returning to Egypt and Sudan even if just for a visit.

Although the future of young people was considered better in Finland and families wished their children to build their lives in Finland, families still hoped their children would take a Sudanese rather than a Finnish partner. Sudanese adults considered it important to pass on Sudanese traditions to the younger generation. As well as hoping that their young people would take care of them in their old age, parents also expected young Sudanese to support relatives in Sudan.

Even if adaptation to Finland had at times been difficult for Sudanese youth, the Finnish teachers and authorities often described young Sudanese as bringing a joy of life, a sense of humour and richness to their work and to Finnish society. The first few months and years in Finland were challenging for young Sudanese but also gave them an opportunity to change their future.

### Recommendations

An element of the pre-resettlement cultural orientation course could be tailored to deal with specific issues affecting young people and children under 15 years of age, either by IOM or by the receiving country, and with the support of adult refugees.

In order to smooth the resettlement process of young refugees and to promote a better acceptance of refugees by local people, there should be carefully designed lectures or workshops for employees of all receiving municipalities/cities about forced migration, and specifically about the way of life and culture of the particular refugee group. This is important especially when refugees come from a previously unknown place and culture. When the resettlement community is small, the local people should be informed about, for example, cultural aspects and forced migration experiences of the refugee group coming to live there before their arrival.

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