

Community partnerships in highrise housing estates

Paper prepared by Cathy Guinness for the 6th Annual Colloquium on Crime Prevention Canberra, September 2006.

This is the story of how a Somali community organization and Jesuit Social Services developed a Horn of Africa youth project in Flemington, Victoria. I will describe

- **How the partnership developed**
- **The youth issues within the African communities**
- **Crime prevention as an emergent need**
- **What we have learned that works well**

I will conclude with comments on the values that underpin the partnership.

1. Beginnings:

- The Somali community approached Jesuit Social Services, requesting assistance in putting in place youth programs
- The agency had staff ready and able to respond to this request
- The community had an established organization through which to negotiate with the agency
- Community and agency had a common commitment to working with the youth, and a shared understanding of how this could be done, focusing on education and recreation
- A partnership proposal was put to the Department of Immigration (DIMIA) to secure funding

2. Learning to work together:

When I learned that the submission had been successful and that DIMIA would supply enough funds for one salary plus some activities, I made appointments to meet workers around Flemington – African workers and youth workers. I wanted to get a fuller picture of the current services that the youth were involved in and what workers saw as the needs. I also wanted to find people to assist the project through joining the Advisory Committee.

The Advisory Committee was set up to include members of the Horn of Africa communities and local agency staff involved in youth work. The Advisory Committee developed a job description and advertised for a Somali youth worker. The selection committee included the Somali president Mr Osman, Somali youth, a senior youth worker and me, the manager of the project. We agreed that the key selection criteria were twofold: cultural – language, knowledge of culture and acceptability by community; and skills based – experience running youth activities and knowledge of the sector. We advertised for a Somali speaking worker.

Two parallel processes occur in our selections – the formal process as per Jesuit Social Services employment policy, and the community process, which is in the hands

of Horn of Africa community leaders. This has resulted each time in a compromise between my interest in having someone with the skills for the job, including suitable training, and the community interest in having someone acceptable to the communities represented on the committee – in the first instance the Somalis of the Somali Community in Victoria.

We believe this flexible approach to organizational systems and processes has been a key to our success. Perhaps more critically, our commitment to community development principles of ‘being led’ by the community and ‘learning as we go’ has produced very positive results.

Of the other Horn of Africa communities, Jesuit Social Services has developed a strong relationship with the Eritrean community and employs a female Eritrean youth worker. We have begun the complex task of opening up conversations with Sudanese and Ethiopian organizations.

3. Youth issues within the Horn of Africa communities

In our program we are meeting both those youth who are refugees and those who were born in Australia of refugee parents.

Prior to their resettlement in Victoria, many young people from the Horn of Africa have spent a number of years in refugee camps, often surviving physical abuse, separation from their family members, witnessing torture or death of family members and have been denied educational opportunities that can be expected in Australia. As a result young people often suffer low self-esteem and need a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Language and cultural barriers commonly lead to communication difficulties, and have made adjusting to the Australian education system problematic. Children are placed in class levels according to age, not according to capacity to achievement levels, and educational achievement can be low. Unemployment is very high – approximately 60% for Somalis.

The second generation has its own issues, characterized by the challenge of living in two cultures, that of their traditional African parents at home, and that of their peer group outside the home. One of the matters of divergence between these two generations is the attachment to clan, language or national group, an identity which is much stronger in the parental generation. Parent-children relations are also very different: African traditions tend to be authoritarian and patriarchal as compared to the post-feminist freedoms Australian girls and boys experience.

Young people surveyed by Victoria University were concerned about a number of issues in their neighbourhood namely drug and alcohol abuse, social and personal issues and harassment (Robyn Broadbent 2001). This year we encouraged youth to express their concerns through a DVD ‘The Voice of African Youth’, and they talked of racism in sport, harassment of girls wearing the hijab, and harassment and violence from police.

4. Crime prevention as an emergent need

Our activities are undertaken against a background of deep concern that these young people are at risk of entering the criminal justice system. Jesuit Social Services is only too aware of the journey through the system that many young Vietnamese men took in the first 20 years of settlement, and the conditions of African refugees are similar. Without a much higher level of active intervention we can expect to see Horn of Africa youth entering the system in greater numbers than at present.

The signs are already there for all to see. We have seen two of our boys being expelled from school, and their relatives came to us desperate for help. They are aware that a young man with limited education has little chance of avoiding trouble with the law.

We have seen groups of mainly African boys hanging around the estate and attracting the attention of police. Relations between these two groups – young police officers and young African men – deteriorated, tensions escalated, and the situation reached what was perceived as a crisis point.

We have seen a spate of antisocial and criminal activity over summer – graffiti on public property, fires in the playground, destruction of playground equipment, theft of computers. African boys were seen offending and were saddled with the blame. Some were caught and dealt with by the police.

The youth experience the police attention as harassment, and they complain of racist and violent behaviour towards them by police. The council youth worker and the legal service took up their complaints and the local police station was investigated and some junior police officers were moved away from the area.

5. What we have learned that works well

Our planning process identified education and recreation as basic activities needed, and the youth workers we selected had a clear understanding of how to run these activities. Many homework programs and soccer teams have been started over the years, and our particular task has been getting the structures right to ensure sustainability.

Education

The Homework program started with parents and children coming together with Somali volunteer tutors. Later non-Somali tutors joined the team – students, teachers and other interested adults. Parents have continued to show a great deal of interest, sharing the supervision of the children and advising program planning. Also crucial to its success has been access to a suitable community venue within the estate where the families live.

The Homework program has developed further with the addition of a computer room, enabling those with limited computer/internet access at home to use essential IT

resources. Skilled Maths and Science tutors have joined those with English and humanities interests. Mothers are now requesting tutors for themselves as they work to improve their English and learn internet skills.

Recreation

The main recreational interest of the boys is soccer. We have supported local African-based soccer teams. We identified racism at matches as a barrier to full participation and set up a Living in Harmony project to tackle this issue. Volunteers and players from the communities are very active in running the soccer activities. AFL and cricket clinics have been run. An exciting new development is that five ethnic organisations have come together with agencies to develop an estate wide soccer club, building on the soccer teams already developed by Eritrean and Somali communities and extending this to others – the Vietnamese, Afghan, Iraqi and so on.

The girls have not had as much organized sport as the boys, and we were able to start girls-only swimming lessons and girls basketball training. Now the girls are keen to start a soccer team! Again, these activities have been run with the support of parents and the understanding and commitment of the female youth worker.

Community connectedness

Community festivals such as an Eid Festival and sporting tournaments have been crucial to bring the whole community together to celebrate. These activities are largely run by volunteers and they provide the community connectedness that is an essential aspect of crime prevention.

Networks of agencies and community leaders are also contributing to community connectedness and are aimed at making services more accessible and relevant to local communities. The network meetings improve cooperation and have led to developing partnerships between different agencies as they each seek to meet the needs of the same communities. The estate-wide soccer club has been one outcome of this work, and increased commitment from the police has been another. These relationships are challenging when they come up against different professional approaches, as will be discussed later in the paper.

Crime prevention

Another crime prevention strategy was taken by Somali and Eritrean elders who were concerned at the behaviour of the youth and the deteriorating relations with police. They met with senior police officers. They started patrolling the estate at night, talking to the youth about their behaviour. Because of the crime level already described the area was identified as a youth crime hotspot.

The police response has been significant. With new leadership of the local station, they have adopted a different style of policing, rebuilding relationships that were damaged. They have built bridges with youth by communicating in a respectful way on the beat. A multicultural liaison officer spends time out in the community meeting families and agencies. The police receive cross-cultural training. Follow up visits are made to families affected by warrants to explain the system. Police have increased their offers to work with the community - they helped run a Youth Camp, they attend community functions, they assist with recreation costs.

The project has many crime prevention elements. We

- seek to avoid any criminalizing and penalizing of youth for behaviour that does not cause serious harm
- provide for the needs of young people, in particular education and developmental recreation
- reduce the motivation, need and opportunity for anti-social behaviour by providing positive outlets
- provide adult male role models for the young people in a community where there are relatively few older males to guide them
- within a risk and resilience framework, we facilitate community strengthening as the foundation stone for this work.

5. Respecting African community processes and African wisdom

Without the relationship of respect between Jesuit Social Services and the community leaders none of our work could be achieved. An incident last month gave me a sharp insight into the contrast between respectful versus ignorant/arrogant relations between agencies and communities.

Mr Osman came to me distressed that an agency worker and two police officers had entered the area where young Somali people were playing sport organized by the Somali community, and had presumed to start up a conversation about assisting them. The youth told the visitors that they should see Mr Osman if they wanted to talk. Osman is well known as the President of the Somali Community, and has well established relations with the police.

Osman was distressed because this is the all too common pattern of agency behaviour. Agencies ignore the community leaders, despite the fact that most of the work with the youth is done by African organisations. A local youth worker can see herself as having better relations with the young people than do the parents or elders, and can exacerbate tensions that may exist between the generations. She may act in isolation from the elders, regarding them as unsupportive of the youth, taking a one sided approach to family relationship issues. She may take the complaints of the youth against the police at face value and look to a rights model of resolution – a model that encourages the youth to make formal complaints against the police, risking an escalation of the poor relations between police and youth.

How can we prevent the mainstream agencies presuming to take control of youth activities? How can we prevent agencies being part of the problem when it comes to intergenerational conflict in new communities?

Our team intends to develop a protocol that we can use to get agencies thinking about how to respect the African leadership, how to support rather than fragment African family and community cohesion. We will invite agency people to sit down with the community leadership, and will share with them ideas of how to respect community protocols.

It was this incident that taught me more deeply what it is about the relationship we have developed that is so valued by the Somali and Eritrean leaders. We genuinely

move with their guidance. If there are disagreements we discuss these and reach understanding and if necessary compromise. This is a win-win situation.

6. Underpinning values

This paper has given me the opportunity to review where we have travelled and what may be around the corner. I will finish by reflecting on what is the nature of the partnership between our organisation and the African communities.

1. **Trust is at the center.** This trust is based on each partner demonstrating again and again that they are there for the young people and the community, that they will do what they say, and that they believe in the integrity of the other.
2. **The leadership of the organizations is right behind the partnership,** takes an active interest, and is ready to allow changes to the way business is done to accommodate the unique nature of the relationship. For Jesuit Social Services this means flexible application of organizational systems and processes.
3. **Community based decision making is at the core of the program.** This involves setting up structures – advisory committee, staff selection committees, working groups – that give preferential attention to community members.
4. **Control of the program is shared,** with both partners able to give way when it is necessary for compromises to be reached in order to go forward. These compromises can be weighty as they involve letting go of agency policies, or in the case of the Somali leadership, challenging the advice of community members.
5. **The partners understand their unique contributions.**
We cannot go forward without each other. Jesuit Social Services depends on the cultural knowledge, wisdom and community connections of the African leaders and workers. Equally, the Somali Community depends on the management structures and skills of JSS, and the status JSS has with governments based on a history of providing successful programs and accountability.
6. **Public celebration of the partnership.** The Somali and Eritrean organizations have been very generous in their acknowledgment of Jesuit Social Services, including inviting us to a Christmas dinner even though they are Muslim! Jesuit Social Services has celebrated the partnership by inviting elders to the Jesuit Social Services Annual Dinner and acknowledging them in all funding documents and reports.

References:

Robyn Broadbent, *Horn of Africa Young People Crime Prevention Peer Education Project*, Victoria University June 2001
Befekir Kebede, DVD, *Living in Harmony? Voices of Horn of Africa youth*, Jesuit Social Services September 2006.