

# NSW SOUTHERN SUDANESE YOUTH DRUG AND ALCOHOL ISSUES REPORT

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in consultation with **Bahr El Ghazal elders & youth leaders**  
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## Definitions

The following abbreviations used in this report shall stand for

<b>Community:</b>	Southern Sudanese community in NSW
<b>BYU:</b>	Bahr El Ghazal Youth Union Inc.
<b>D&amp;A:</b>	Drug and Alcohol
<b>Sudanese:</b>	South Sudanese
<b>Child/Children:</b>	Unmarried Sudanese person
<b>Welfare Agency:</b>	NSW Department of Community Services (DOCS)

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Southern Sudanese community constitutes a major proportion of African migrants living in Australia (approximately 8000). In recent years the Southern Sudanese community has been the subject of complex issues affecting migrant settlement and integration into the broader Australian society. Some of these issues have raised major concern within the community itself as well as concern among the general Australian public. Among the key issue of concern identified by the community was social misconduct by some of the youth and **drug and alcohol abuse** was established as the main cause.

Having identified the problems BYU youth representatives organised a three-day national conference held in January 2007 in Auburn, Sydney, to discuss issues affecting them and draw out possible solutions. BYU is a national Southern Sudanese youth association managing and representing the community affairs of Australian members from the Bahr El Ghazal region of South Sudan.

The information contained in this report was collected from the BYU conference. This report entails outcomes of discussions on D&A and outlines possible solutions to the problem of harmful D&A use. It should be noted that in line with Sudanese cultural practices the issue of youth D&A use has been approached in a holistic consultative manner involving the opinions and experience of young people and elders. Youth D&A use is viewed as it affects the whole community and also its relationship to matters of cultural identity in Australia.

Of the key issues that were raised at the conference, some were identified as inaccurate stereotyped impressions of the community by non-Sudanese Australians for example the perception that Sudanese youth are involved in crime more than other ethnic or non-ethnic groups in Australia. In contrast, the issue of D&A stood out as a material problem affecting the community. Both youth and elderly representatives unanimously agreed that D&A plays a fundamental role in generating many problems that were recognized as the backbone of the issues affecting the image of the Sudanese community in Australia.

### Summary of Problems Associated With Youth Drug & Alcohol Abuse

- Health repercussions
- Social misconduct e.g. offensive behaviour in public
- Criminal acts
- Family break ups

## Recommendations

1. Conduct cultural education programs informed and run by Sudanese people for 4 key groups:
  - Sudanese families
  - Sudanese youth
  - Social welfare providers
  - General Australian public
2. Establish better-resourced and more effective youth programs and youth centres that engage unemployed and other at risk youth in training, education and extra curricular activities.
3. Conduct culturally appropriate information sessions with Sudanese people to raise community awareness about effects and appropriate ways of using alcohol.
4. Make resources available so the Sudanese can conduct community/youth seminars and forums where they can discuss issues affecting them and find ways of helping themselves.
5. Explore ways that parents and family members can take active roles in parenting and disciplining their children when they are using D&A.
6. Allow the family affairs to be settled within the community boundaries but in liaison with welfare agencies.
7. Allow parents/community proposals to send addicted children to rehabilitation/counselling centres rather than removing children from families.
8. Conduct consultative sessions between parents/youth/community members and the welfare agencies to clarify their exact role in relation to family affairs.
9. Employ members of the Sudanese community including youth to work in welfare agencies, as they are more likely to be able to successfully educate community members about policies implemented by these agencies.

Specific recommendations relating to DOCS are on page 9

## **CULTURAL CONTEXT: Drug and Alcohol Use in South Sudan**

The use of Drugs and Alcohol in Sudan is predominantly determined by well-established cultural practices from a persons region of origin. Sudanese cultural practices guide how to live, what to eat, how to dress. This distinct cultural background diverges greatly from Australian norms. Many young Sudanese migrants seek to quickly accustom to mainstream Australian cultural practices but lack a history of knowledge that non-migrants take for granted. This cultural conflict was identified as a major problem commonly referred to as “**culture shock**”.

In South Sudan use of drugs is strictly prohibited and punishable by law. The only drug available is cannabis sativa (marijuana) as opposed to the varieties of chemical drugs found in Australia. When the youth or even some of the elderly come into contact with these drugs in Australia, the venture becomes an overwhelmingly new experience as they do not have any prior practice or knowledge of the outcomes and dangers that may lie ahead. Some young people end up deeply caught up with drugs such as ice, ecstasy, heroine or cocaine and do not know how to address their dependency.

On the other hand alcohol is widely consumed in South Sudan similar to Australia. The only difference is the cultural laws governing its consumption. First and foremost, children and women do not drink alcohol at all (with exception of a few specific tribes). Only married men are allowed to consume alcohol and are expected to consume it responsibly. Unmarried young men, irrespective of their age, are considered children by their parents and are culturally oriented to respect their parents’ directions about matters such as D & A use. This contrasts with the Australian law that eliminates parental control once a child reaches eighteen years.

This cultural difference becomes a major set back for new Sudanese migrants as the young ones tend to adapt to the new Australian culture, while the elderly prefer to preserve the Sudanese ways of living. This was highlighted as a major issue causing family break ups as the young ones find themselves advantaged by the Australian freedom policy.

Secondly, alcohol is mainly consumed in social ceremonies such as weddings and initiation. The type of alcohol consumed is traditionally made with low alcoholic content. Its effects are relatively harmless as opposed to the strong spirits that new migrants in Australia can become addicted to, hence provoking acts of violence and compromising their health.

# Drug and Alcohol Issues Raised at the BYU Conference

## 1. Cultural Difference

As mentioned before cultural shock was labelled a serious issue affecting the Sudanese community in general specifically the younger generation. Their wartime past made them miss out on several key life experiences such as freedom and also in Sudan, there is not the multicultural demographic that is present in Australian urban society. These new experiences overwhelm most Sudanese migrants and as a result they succumb to new customs that are not part of their tradition and this creates conflict in the community.

Consequently the Australian cultural norms play a major role in shaping the ways of thought of young Sudanese. For example, most Sudanese children consume alcohol on the basis that it is a part of everyday life unlike back in their country of origin.

## 2. Australian Policies Against Sudanese Disciplinary Methods and Children's Abuse of "freedom"

Sudanese migrated to Australia in a quest for "**freedom**", a treasured pursuit for which they have lost millions of their own flesh and blood. The Australian government offers various kinds of freedom which young Sudanese are not exposed to in their home country. It is in the best interest of Sudanese youth to utilise this freedom to start a better life for them and to contribute to freeing those that they left behind. Ironically, some members of the community mostly young ones tend to misinterpret this freedom as a back up tool for opposing their parents' directives.

In Sudan, where parenting techniques are different to Australian norms, Sudanese parents are more able to intervene and discipline their children successfully when the children are engaging in harmful activities. Here in Australia, Sudanese disciplinary methods are compromised by laws that many Sudanese view as always giving the children the upper hand.

These laws restrict Sudanese parents from intervening in the way they know how, when their children arrive home drunk. This experience is disempowering for the parents and leaves the children without adequate boundaries around acceptable alcohol use.

### **3. Police and DOCS Involvement Causing Family Break-ups**

Having mentioned the abuse of freedom rights by the young ones, parents were quick to note that police and DOCS involvement in their family affairs adds “fuel to the burning flame”. They claim that when the police are called to a household due to a report of a domestic conflict between the child and their parents, the police often use the child that has reported the problem as the sole interpreter in discussions between the police and the parents. Hence, the child gives biased stories that the police use as the only reliable source.

In addition, Sudanese parents claimed that they live in fear of DOCS taking away their children as their children have misunderstood the role of this welfare agency. Most of these children think that DOCS is there to offer protection and all other necessary services they may need. Hence, they do not feel the need to live with their parents. Parents on the other hand ask why DOCS is always quick to take away these children and not cater for their wellbeing such as monitoring their daily activities and whereabouts. DOCS should understand that most of these children create family feuds as a means of moving out to carryout activities that parents do not approve of, such as D&A consumption, knowing that DOCS will not be there to monitor them.

Parents therefore, feel helpless at their children’s D&A issue claiming the police and DOCS are to blame for disallowing their involvement in decisions regarding their children’s wellbeing. They call upon these institutions to help resolve this issue or are held accountable for the consequences of D&A issue.

### **4. Idleness**

Idleness was raised as another important factor contributing to D&A abuse among Sudanese young migrants. Children who are unemployed and not in education have gone through excruciating life experiences prior to coming to Australia and have often not accessed an education at all or have had a disrupted education. As a result, many of the youth find it very difficult starting school from scratch and eventually become frustrated and drop out. They become idle with nothing to do as most of the youth have no previous experience to join the work force. They end up forming groups and use alcohol and drugs just to pass time not necessarily understanding the long-term effects of these activities.

## **5. Lack of Discouragement Against Youth Drug and Alcohol Use**

Despite the extensive efforts by the community elders to discourage the youth against D&A consumption, it was noted that support from youth leaders and fellow members was lacking. Most youth leaders neither publicly condemn nor accept it and this mixed stance was not helpful in tackling the D&A issue. Youth involvement in persuading and educating their peers was identified as a key strategy in combating the D&A issue.

## **6. Isolation of Addicted Children**

Some individuals in the community have been identified as alcoholics and this makes attempts to assist them extremely difficult. A majority of these alcoholic individuals live on their own and feel neglected. The community has not done much to give such individuals a sense of belonging. This approach is considered by most as ineffective and worsened the overall situation. Those youth considered to be addicted to alcohol are at great risk as they cannot take care of themselves. If the Sudanese community is unable to take care of these vulnerable young people then the negative effects of their addiction will become associated with the whole community.

## **7. Cases of Deaths Due to Effects of Drugs and Alcohol Use**

A major issue of concern raised at the workshop was the recurring loss of young lives to gang fights. Over recent years there have been a number of incidences where Sudanese youth clashed with youth from other communities, resulting in loss of lives. A link between these incidents and D&A was established among both Sudanese youth and the other youth groups. This elevates the need for urgent measures to be put in place to deal with the D&A issue and hopefully reduce subsequent gang fights. Furthermore, the community was quick to comment on the slow investigative procedures implemented by the police during the above-mentioned deaths.

## **Recommendations Relating to DOCS**

The problems in dealing with the D&A issues discussed at the conference were mainly attributed to a lack of understanding between parents/community members and welfare agencies.

1. It was recommended that these parties should maintain dialogue and establish lasting resolutions. For instance, supporting and providing parents with resources to organise groups to settle and manage family disputes under set guidelines without the involvement of welfare agencies. This would provide children with consistent consequences for engaging in harmful behaviours without undermining the authority of the parental role.
2. Another important point to note is that Sudanese parents' disciplinary measures do not constitute physical abuse but rather take the form of psychological lectures reflective of Sudanese culture based on mutual respect.
3. With reference to D&A Sudanese parents recommend referral of addicted children into rehabilitation centres. Those youth who have an addiction are at risk of dying through accidents or fights. For instance two young men in Western Sydney were recently run over by a car as a result of their drunkenness. The community asks welfare agencies to rehabilitate these children rather than removing them from their parents.
4. Miscommunication was one of the factors identified that hinders cooperation between the community and welfare agencies. The community does not understand some policies of these agencies and the community does not always feel understood by welfare agencies. It was pointed out that hiring community members and youth representatives as welfare workers would diminish the communication barrier and reduce conflict.
5. Regular dialogue and consultation must be maintained between welfare agencies and community members. It has become a slogan among the Sudanese community that these agencies always listen to their issues and suggestions but do not take action or provide feedback due to lack of regular meetings.

## **CONCLUSION**

The responsibility for addressing D&A use and its associated affects on the Sudanese community lies with both the Sudanese and the agencies that provide welfare services. The Sudanese believe the issues are worsening and this affects the wellbeing of the whole community and in turn the wider Australian society. There are youth leaders and elders who are willing to collaborate more with welfare agencies and government departments if the willingness to resource and implement solutions that are perceived as beneficial to the Sudanese community is present.

## Appendix 1. Youth Case Study

“My family has abandoned me. I want to go back to my mother in Sudan.” These were words from a young Sudanese\* admitted to hospital in Western Sydney after an almost fatal accident. He and another friend were on a drinking spree when they tried to cross a busy highway and were both hit by a car. Both were admitted to hospital with one person sustaining minor injuries and the other youth admitted with major head injuries. This youth was unconscious for 2 weeks.

Myself\* and my family accidentally met him while visiting a relative in that hospital. The sight of seeing many Sudanese for the first time in over four weeks overwhelmed him with tears of joy dripping down his cheek. “I am so happy to see you”, he said, as his family had not visited him in hospital at all.

This young person came to Australia with his uncle’s family leaving both his parents behind. On arrival he never used to drink any alcohol. However he started drinking socially with a group of friends and was exposed to peer pressure, and as time went by his drinking increased. His uncle got frustrated with his constant drunkenness and asked him to move out if he refused to obey him.

He thought living independently was good for him to learn to make his own decisions. He enrolled at TAFE to pursue his engineering dreams. His friends however were not in school and jobless. They drank constantly and he found it hard not to join in. His drinking habit started to affect his studies and he eventually dropped out. Leaving TAFE allowed him to spend more time drinking and it dominated his life. He told us that there were times when they would rather starve than miss out on alcohol. One positive outcome of the accident is that it changed his way of thinking. While at hospital, he felt bad that neither his friends nor his family came to see him. When he was talking to us, he kept repeating himself saying “Yes, I feel alone but who am I to blame than myself. Let me go home to my mother in Sudan”

I was almost drawn into tears at the psychological torment the young man was going through and I realized the devastating effects of alcohol. This young man’s ordeal is just one of the many alcohol related cases among Sudanese youth. There are many other addicts that have lost their future while several have lost their lives in gang fights in clubs. This is the magnitude of the alcohol issue in the community and the need for urgent measures to address it.

- *The names of the young people in this case study have been omitted for privacy reasons.*

## Appendix 2. Themes & Overview of the BYU Conference

The following were the three main themes for the conference with subtitles discussed in individual workshops;

### Culture

- **Drug and Alcohol abuse**
- Moral values
- Family affairs
- Law and order
- Public social conduct and racism

### Education

- Language barrier
- Scholarships and equity in schools

### Health

- Australian Healthcare system
- Nutrition

### General overview of the Conference

- Very well attended with record attendance of more than 1200 overall.
- Workshops touched most of the issues affecting the community.
- Most issues raised were of vital importance but were not deeply exhausted due to time constraint.
- Due to time of the year there was not enough representation from social welfare agencies and government departments but those who attended were welcomed.
- Great support from conference sponsors - Western Union, ACDN, Auburn CDAT/NSW Health, Anglicare, May Murray Neighbourhood centre Inc, STARTTS, Auburn Migrant Resource Centre and Mr. Bona Thiap Dor.
- Great participation from Professor Marial Takpiny, Bahr El Ghazal Union State representatives, Sudanese Women group, Jenut El Mariam, SWAT, Management- Bahai Centre, Bahr El Ghazal and general Sudanese community elders and youth.