Sudanese Refugee Resettlement
In Syracuse, New York

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Part I: The Research Context

The Interfaith Works Center for New Americans (CNA) is conducting this research project within its many diverse refugee populations in Syracuse, New York. The goal of the project at large is to better understand refugees’ needs and concerns. This will enable CNA to create or adjust programs and services to better meet the needs of the refugee populations CNA serves. Greater understanding of the project goals will affect refugees’ adjustment and success in their resettlement here locally in Syracuse, and in America as a whole.

Different groups of Syracuse graduate students from an International Relations course are conducting interviews with the majority of the population groups. Karen McNamara and I, who are anthropology graduate students taking a collaborative methods course, have been conducting research with the Sudanese refugee community served by CNA. In addition to the larger goal of analyzing the experiences, of refugees during the first 3-6 months after resettlement and beyond, another goal of this research with the Sudanese community is to understand better how to help them create and sustain self help groups and associations. In many other refugee communities in Syracuse, these groups and associations were successfully formed and provide various services to their communities. For the Sudanese there have some issues in the organization and leadership of their two main community groups: The Lost Boys Foundation and the Sudanese families group.

This project aims to better to understand the overarching research question:

How can CNA better serve the Sudanese Community?

And the following sub-questions:

1.) What issues arose when Sudanese refugees first came to Syracuse?
2.) What issues are being experienced now?
3.) How can Sudanese community groups be strengthened?
Part II: Methodology

The main research question “How can CNA better serve the Sudanese Community?” and the three sub-questions were consciously generated to be over-arching. Since CNA is interested in many different aspects of the Sudanese communities needs and concerns, we wanted to keep the main research question general. This will allow those being interviewed a chance to direct us towards their own concerns and ideas. In this way, we hoped to avoid the assumptions as researchers as to what the Sudanese community in Syracuse might see as issues or concerns that should be addressed.

We designed our research to specifically be open-ended and to cater to those we were interviewing. We would meet with participants in their homes, and spend a great deal of time discussing with them the story of Sudan and their coming here in attempt to connect with them and understand the context in which they arrived in the United States. We would include other Sudanese family members and roommates into our discussions. These interviews were approximately two hours long each, and involved open-ended questions.

After connecting to the interviewee through their story of how they came from Sudan, we would begin to discuss in more detail what it was like arriving in Syracuse, what services they remember receiving from CNA, and more general experiences of arriving in a new country and culture. We began to discuss different issues and concerns of importance with them, letting them lead the direction of the conversation, and often only asking them for further clarification.

Methodology for discussing Sudanese community groups in Syracuse was carefully planned since it was implied that many within the community are not willing to discuss the recent issues in the community groups, and have not been forthcoming about issues in the past. For this reason, we did not bring this topic of discussion out in the beginning of the interview, rather than asking direct questions about community groups we would wait and observe if it came out naturally in the conversation. If not,
we would ask questions about this topic late into the interview, allowing time to develop rapport and a level of comfort level between us before discussing these issues which may prove to be sensitive.

Additionally, we also attempted to discuss and make clear the purposes of the interview, to improve programs and services for refugees, as well as make clear that the interviewees did not have answer any questions with which they left uncomfortable.

Using a list generated by CNA, we scheduled and completed interviews with 5 individuals and/or groups. These interviews consisted of one with a Lost Boy, with participation of his Sudanese roommates, two with young men (one a Lost boy, the other not), one with a father from a Sudanese family, and the other with a mother from a Sudanese family. The interview with the mother also involved some input and discussion with her children as well. Additionally, we were able to discuss topics in more depth with the man who acted as our interpreter, and also became an informant for this research project whom we developed a stronger relationship with over the course of the research project.

**Part III: Findings**

A few patterns in needs and concerns became clear through the interviewing process. Since our interviews are with 5 individuals and/or groups, it is not possible to generalize to the entire Sudanese population in Syracuse, but it certainly is possible to understand varying viewpoints and experiences for individuals and family groups, and their role as members of the larger Sudanese community.

By and large, the main concerns that were voiced frequently included education (including English language training), employment, transportation, money (including for scholarship, to support themselves, and to support friends and family back in Africa), family, traumatic memories and community group issues.
If we explore these concerns discussed by the Sudanese we interviewed, we will find that all are deeply interrelated and therefore not easy to isolate, as each issue affects or is affected by other issues. I will try to focus a little on each concern, using quotes from interviews to exemplify specific issues, and show how the concerns are related to each other.

1. **Education**

   Education was an extremely important concern for all of the Sudanese we spoke with. Often, it was a topic of interest and focus for Lost Boys in their stories of going to the refugee camp in Kenya, and we heard from many people how they studied under a shady tree, writing their alphabet in the dirt. A young man explained how the U.S. decided to take 5,000 Lost Boys as follows:

   And these kids they are desperate, they don’t have education, they don’t have something to eat, they don’t have fun, they have lost everything, and their only worry is to have education. So when the [U.S.] senators visit our camp they were making our rounds and talked to us and they say “What do you need us to do for you? What do you need American government to do?” So we told them that we just need education. We think that we have lost everything, and we think that education is our mother and our father. So when you become educated, you will be able to know what was the cause of your suffering. So we asked American Senators, if you can say that, please, if you can go back to U.S. and talk to American government and talk to American communities, American churches, about our inquiry that we need only education- what we need is only education.

   Additionally, we learned that when the Lost Boys Foundation was started, its goals were to provide and help Lost Boys with their education, especially through scholarships. The Lost Boys we spoke with learned English in the refugee camp in Kenya, and most also completed high school there. Many discussed passing ESL classes, getting their G.E.D., going to Onondaga Community College, and future aspirations to attain higher degrees.

   For Sudanese families, education was equally important, though educational levels and English skills seemed to vary more greater than among the Lost Boys. A major concern for the Sudanese families we spoke with was education for the women, especially ESL. Many voiced that while they wished Sudanese women could learn English, and also get a job, often it was too difficult due to issues such as
lack of available childcare, or timing that did not allow women to attend the classes. In a family where all the children were school aged, the mother also worked outside the home. Additionally, for families, it was apparent that some had reached higher education in Sudan or elsewhere before reaching the United States, but may be limited to “working with your hands” in the United States due to language issues or lack of degree recognition. One Sudanese father commented to us that he observed that even after attaining higher degrees in the United States, it seemed that Lost Boys still could not move out of factory work, an observation he found to be disturbing.

2. Employment

Employment was another very important concern for the Sudanese. As mentioned above, there are the links to education and hopes for better future employment. Many discussed their hardships working in various factories and other manual labor jobs. Most had the goal of achieving further education being able to work “with the mind” rather than the hands.

In addition to the concerns of education and achieving a better job, there is also the issue of trying to work while also attending classes. Both Lost boys and family members talked about conflicting schedules that were either simply difficult (such as working fulltime factory jobs and attending OCC or ESL classes) or that made it impossible to attend classes at all. I encountered Sudanese who worked two jobs or had worked two jobs in the past in order to provide for family here as well as in Africa.

Another concern, as voiced by a Lost Boy, was regarding the fact that when Lost Boys come here, they have not yet had a job, and need time to learn the basic skills and knowledge to be successful in the workplace:

And also, we begin to get [welfare], we taken three months here, for American government to support you on welfare, three months from the day you are coming to Africa, or wherever you are coming as a refugee, they give you three months to support you, and then after three months you are on your own. And guess what? How can you just come and throw somebody
down like that? Somebody who don’t know language, who didn’t make friendship yet? You know? You don’t know language, you don’t have friends, you don’t have anything and also some of us, we never had a job in life, so we have difficulties of how to enter a job. We never know, how we sleep late in Africa, we don’t care about time. You just sleep, and just wake up and go wherever you want. We don’t have that system, so it may be happening that one of the day you sleep overtime, and your manager is going to fire you, he doesn’t know your background. What are you going to do? You become definitely homeless.

Additionally, another young man discussed how difficult it was to reach his goals. He discussed the conundrum of how he wished to get a car, but to get a car; he needed a license as well as a good paying job to save the money to purchase a vehicle. For the license, he needed to pass a driving test, which included a written part in English. But to attend ESL classes, he needed to find a different job so he could go to the ESL classes, because at this time they conflicted with his work schedule. But he needed transportation to get to a more lucrative job with better hours! One can see how difficult these issues can be, especially for someone without the family, community, support systems and its’ available resources that many American citizens may have to fall back on in times of need.

3. Transportation

This example of interconnectedness of employment, education, and transportation can lead as a segue into issues of transportation. As is illustrated above, it is obvious just how important having transportation can be for education, and employment. The following quote illustrates one kind of difficulty for Sudanese refugees after first arriving in Syracuse:

We were working in the one place, about six of us, were working in one factory, it’s called TVC. So we work in second shift, we finished around 12 [midnight], so we were walking on foot from East Syracuse, coming to our places. So and that area, you know, it has like some highways, so we were walking on that highway and police came at night at around 12-12:30 or so and he stop us and say 'why are you walking?' and the weather was cold also, ‘cause we did not have any ride and we told him that we, uh, that 'we just finish from work, we are going home'

Many people that we interviewed discussed transportation as an important issue, in the time they first arrived but also often still at present (Thought their time since arrival is varied greatly from person to
person). I was told that within the Sudanese community, people will offer rides and carpooling for grocery shopping, doctor visits and other such occasions. According to those I spoke with, this method of arranging and sharing rides is informal, and is often a task given by those who have been here for a longer period of time to newer arriving Sudanese.

4. Money

Money is of course an issue which touches every other part of life in America. Upon first arrival, money is needed for basic necessities such as food, bills, rent, and doctors’ visits. After the time of welfare support runs out, it is necessary to find a job to continue to support oneself. Additionally, one may need to save up to buy a car. If someone wants to attain higher education, they need money, scholarships, or loans or aid them.

But at the same time someone is attempting to forge a future here for themselves in the United States, they must continue to think of those back in Africa. Lost boys we spoke with describe working overtime, or two jobs, and sending money back to family and friends in Africa, while still trying to reach goals for themselves here:

So that the time that we go to school, we worked hard and we also help people back home. We divided our money- 250, 300- and divided it too, maybe you have 150 for the house and then 150- you send it for your parents, back home so that you can help them. But what we do at that time, we save some money when one person can buy a car or we share the car so that you can buy the transfer for the school, like that and at the time, bit by bit, everyone had a car, one by one. So we try ourselves, very very hard, we work day and night, we are working full time shift and also working school full time. Real hard work. And then we buy the, everybody have the little bit car and don’t have car all of you, and 2 or 3 of you they have the car at home so that they can ride the ride to work and then come back. That is late at night it is very easy for those who are just coming in, sometimes and they have the help a lot, and whatever they need, that is the way we help ourselves. In addition to money for basics, money to send back to family, and money for schools, some of those interviewed were also working on larger projects to help those back in Sudan, such as helping to establish health clinics. One of the issues voiced by Lost Boys trying to get loan money for college was
that if you make over a certain amount, you don’t qualify for loans, yet at the same time, most of the money they are earning is being sent to Africa to support family and hence unavailable to go towards tuition fees. A young man illustrates this catch 22 of working and school loans:

We work full time and go fulltime to the school and there are regulations that if you make more than 18,000 or 19,000 a year you cannot get financial aid... So if you leave, not work that hard so that you can get financial aid you cannot manage with the rent.

5. Family

In addition to concerns of supporting family that is back in Africa, family issues here in Syracuse were also very important. The mother we spoke with discussed how the lack of daycare for her many young children created a situation that kept her from getting a job or furthering her education. Another family discussed that the neighborhood they lived in was not safe, and they felt many unsupervised children in the neighborhood would fight with or influence their own children, and the therefore did not feel comfortable letting them play outside, hoping they will be able to afford to move to a nicer neighborhood in the future.

Others, including those without families with them in Syracuse, also voiced concern for those with children, suggesting that there was a great need for daycare, as well as concern over school aged children having access to homework help if their own parents were still learning English themselves.

6. Traumatic issues

Though most did not refer to themselves in regards to dealing with traumatic events in the past, it was cited as an issue for many Sudanese in Syracuse:

There are some people that who have been talking sometime back, that there are some people who need counseling and everything like that because of the war and have been traumatized in their heart or their mind, everything like that. So those people they want to, at least, not very many, but few of them, they have those suffering, or of that situation. If someone goes to school when they find it very difficult and drop their classes, because the people were trying to go back instead of staying here and everything because of their situation, that they paid them
so that is some situation that they make them. And that is why, now we have the community around and everything, some of them, they cooled down a little bit. Even know they are coming to a point where they realize what they are doing. And it was very hard that time, when you come in the first year and you see the situation, you've messed up with everything, you see that the life is very very hard and everything is negative and very difficult sometimes.

For one young man who arrived on his own in Syracuse more recently, he discussed the isolation he felt here. Not knowing the already established Sudanese community or the more fraternal Lost Boys, many of whom knew each other for many years in the refugee camp, this young man felt unable to access the community. He also described feeling that since he came from the city, and also came more recently, that he felt as though the community and refugee resettlement here in Syracuse did not give him as much support as, for example, the Lost Boys who arrived early on. He felt that perhaps, the assumption was that because he has lived on his own in a city and having held a job before arriving in the U.S., he would need less support to adjust to life in Syracuse. Still in his first year here, he feels that in spite of this experience, he could use more help and support during his adjustment, especially as he is wrestling with emotions and issues from Sudan and attempting to adapt to a new culture, and language which he still needs to learn.

7. Community groups

The two Sudanese community groups in Syracuse, the Lost Boys Foundation (LBF) and the Sudanese family group, are both referred to by those interviewed as having leadership issues.

In discussion about the LBF with Lost Boys, many stated that the original purpose of the group was to create educational opportunities through scholarships for the Lost Boys. Additionally, it was reported that leadership issues and conflicts seem to have lead to the loss of a physical space for the LBF as well as many on the board of directors to choose to leave the group. This issue tended to involve funds, and leadership issues. One young man voiced a concern that he would like to learn to be a better
leader, and he feels that he wants to be a leader and role model, but wants to learn better skills to function in this role. Another young man told me that this money that was supposed to go towards scholarships, sometimes got diverted to leadership projects such as health clinics in Africa, something which seemed to stray from the LBF original agenda.

Yet, our impression that this organization was no longer in existence was apparently incorrect. A few young men declared that the organization was starting to get better over time, after a leadership crisis was resolved. When asked, none stated that they went to meetings regularly, though interested and involved, most found that their time commitments to work and school did not allow enough time to be involved with the community group as well.

For the Sudanese family group, those we interviewed were less interested. One man stated he had no interest in going, and another man informed us that the leadership needed some work and that the organization did not seem to do much, rather it was more for celebrations such as birthdays. No one seemed to know when and if there were meeting help for this group and it was not clear to us how meetings and events were organized or people informed.

A young man explains to me his thoughts on why the Sudanese community and community groups are not stronger:

To elaborate about that more, when you are asking about the Sudanese that move to Syracuse, because everybody is independent, because you work by yourself, maybe the money that you make, you are supporting some people back home, there are people all over the world that is why they are working all the time. Maybe sometime you see from Africa, they need some money and something like that, everybody is depending like that...

Key Understandings:

The bulleted points below quickly summarize some of the key points we learned through the research interview process:
Education is an extremely important concern for everyone we interviewed— from ESL to college, and most were extremely interested in gaining further education, especially to gain better jobs. School funding remains a prominent concern, especially while supporting other family members. Additionally, juggling time between classes and work are mentioned as difficult, especially when one is also expected to support family/friends in Africa as well.

According to those I spoke with, during the early adjustment period establishing connections within the community, Sudanese and non-Sudanese, can be important and positively affect the resettlement process in Syracuse. This may include supportive sponsors, churches, co-workers, Sudanese community members, and community groups. For some recent arrivals, making connections with the community has been a difficult task.

Those who have just arrived may have more issues such as transportation, which can play a large role in getting and maintaining a job, as well as in getting basic necessities such as groceries or visiting the doctor. While Sudanese do car-pool and offer rides at some points, many still struggle with getting around, especially when they first arrive.

While leadership issues seem to play an important role in how people view community groups, there are other factors that have kept people from being very active in community groups, including having little to no extra time outside of work and classes, as well as feeling as though the community groups are not addressing important issues or making an impact.

For women specifically, ESL is important, especially since many do not know as much English as the men. Because of this, they more often stay at home with the children while their husbands work. Many wish they had reliable and affordable daycare so they could attend classes and eventually work outside the home.

While many are not necessarily active (or at least not regularly active) in the formal community groups, many people we spoke with are still involved in the community—from gatherings to giving rides to interpreting at hospitals—there are various kinds of help within the community on a more informal basis, though these may not be known to newer arrivals.

**Part IV: Methodological Concerns**

One of our main concerns methodologically with this research project was that the young men acting as our interpreter was also someone we interviewed, and additionally, someone who had been a
leader in a community group in the past. Because of this, we were concerned that people that were
being interviewed may not feel comfortable discussing all their issues and concerns with the community
groups while he is acting as an interpreter. His presence may have made interviewees censor their
words or feelings.

Additionally, he is not an official trained interpreter, and therefore, in interviews where he was
responsible for interpreting our questions to them and their answers, it is not known how direct the
translations are or could be. In some cases, the interpreter would also add his own opinions as to why
the interviewee held a certain opinion, and it is possible that this could change the focus of the
interview, or create a situation where the interviewee followed the topics/opinions that the interpreter
may have suggested as important.

Since we could only interview a smaller number of individuals or groups, we were able to gain a
detailed understanding of some Sudanese people’s concerns, but were not able to examine it from a
larger lens that could examine the entire community as a whole. This data allows us to understand
many needs and concerns on a micro level, which has allowed us to understand how needs and
concerns vary between different individuals. At the same time, this means some voices in the
community were not heard, and those voices may also have important opinions, especially regarding the
voices and leadership of community groups.

Lastly, since the interviews were open ended and led by those being interviewed, the same
topics or questions may not have been asked every time. While this allowed the interviewee to direct us
to the topics they found most important, it could also have left out important opinions regarding
matters they did not bring up on their own.

For future research, it may be better to have an interpreter who is not so highly involved in
community groups. Additionally, it may be helpful to create some sort of wider-scope research project
that includes more participants from the Sudanese community. This will allow for more voices to be heard, and also add onto this more detailed data we have collected.

Part V: Ethical Issues

The first and more apparent ethical issue is that through this interviewing process, participants had to discuss their past coming to the United States, and also with their past before arriving. In this process, most of the interviews had to relive past traumatic events again, and bring up feelings and issues concerning that which brought them to the United States as refugees.

As we began the interviews, as interviewers we sometimes felt uncomfortable asking questions about their circumstances of arrival in the United States. While the information we learned helped us to understand where the Sudanese were coming from, and their expectations in coming to the U.S., as well as issues that may affect them here, it was also difficult to see people remembering distressing and traumatic events in their past. While this was a true ethical issue, we also tried to make it clear that interviewees did not have to discuss anything which made them upset, yet most felt it important and relevant to continue to tell us their experiences in Sudan.

A second ethical issue that may have changed some results in the research project was that we could not guarantee anonymity for interviewees in this project. Since the interviewees were selected by CNA, and since their relationship with CNA involves knowing details about their community group involvement, family, and employment, interviewees may not have felt truly able to speak their mind on all topics, and may have held back some information.

To manage these ethical concerns in the future, I think continuing to be explicit that interviewees do not have to speak on any topics they are uncomfortable with, and also that they can choose to end the interview at anytime will continue to be important parts in introducing the research project and their role as participant. In regards to anonymity, in the future this could be managed by
allowing for more random sampling of the community through lists generated by those conducting the research. In this specific project, I am not sure if the lack of anonymity changed people’s choice of topic. Many seemed comfortable voicing a variety of opinions and concerns for this project.

**Part VI: Recommendations**

In response to the needs and concerns of the Sudanese community members that we spoke with, here are a few recommendations which may help to meet the needs of Sudanese refugees in Syracuse, as well as to help them to establish self-help groups and associations after their 3-6 months of direct contact with CNA:

*For New Arrivals:*

1.) Making a more formalized version of a transportation share between Sudanese and other interested community members. This could involve generating a list of those willing to help with rides to work, the grocery store, doctor, etc and making this available to new arrivals who may not know who to ask for help with transportation.

2.) Welcoming new arrivals with community connections. Those who had active sponsors, involved church groups, or an interested and welcoming community seemed to express an ability to more easily transition into life here, make friends and connections and create a community. Making sure to keep up this community involvement for newer arrivals, through Sudanese community events, sponsors, and other networks to get help will continue to make the transition less emotionally and physically isolating.

*For the Entire Sudanese Community:*
1.) Creating a Sudanese community newsletter which shares events, projects, and community group schedules may allow for greater community connections inside the community, even for those too busy to attend meetings or become more involved. This could also help new arrivals know where to ask for help, and also keep them from feeling isolated.

2.) Regaining a physical space for community group meetings and events. This physical space would allow for greater organization for the community groups, and create a center where people could find the resources they may need as they navigate a new culture and country.

3.) Creating a cooperative daycare program among the women who wish to attend classes and work. If a physical space was regained for the community groups, it could also create a space for the cooperative daycare. This daycare could run on a volunteer basis, where women would volunteer some time to watch others children when they are not busy, and other women would watch their children while they are attending classes or working. This may not work for women who wish to work full time, but for those who would like to attend morning ESL classes, or other part-time work or classes, it may allow for free daycare by members in their own community, giving them the chance to increase their English skills and education, and improving their chances for future employment, and interaction with the greater Syracuse community. Additionally, if women are able to gain the needed skills and then become members of the work force, this may also alleviate husbands who may be working two jobs. This would also alleviate the time crunch, and also allow for greater involvement in community groups if they are interested.

For the Community Groups/Organizations:
1. Have workshops discussing leadership and organizing aspects of running groups. The workshop could discuss the role of being a leader, and work on how to be a successful leader in the community. Additionally, by exploring alternative methods of group organization (such as, for example, consensus based groups rather than groups with one elected leader) the groups may be able to address their leadership struggles through changing the power structure of the organization. These workshops could also discuss creating different written and agreed upon goals for each organization that the community members find useful and relevant to community needs and also prevents different leaders from changing the organization to meet their own interests.

2. The community newsletter, as mentioned above can detail what these two organizations are working on, keeping the community at large aware of their projects and additionally, motivate them, and also keep the community groups working on the issues that were chosen by the larger community. Additionally, this newsletter will allow those who are extremely busy to continue to be aware and take part in projects and events within the community.