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A bridge between two worlds: leadership among resettled Sudanese youth in an American city

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Introduction

Humanitarian efforts are often focused on children in conflict, since the international legal definitions create a practical framework for addressing child-specific needs (Schwartz 2010: 5). Youth have different needs than children, however, and possess more potential to influence both the society around them and their home communities. Resettled youth face multiple transitions simultaneously, from conflict to third country resettlement and from child to adult. Their needs include not only the legal aspects of protection, but also the social and economic aspects, noted in UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming strategy as "the spheres in which most rights violations of persons of concern occur" (UNHCR PDES 2010: 2).

Research and writing on refugee diasporas has focused on adults and elites, their influence on policy and their potential for peace-building/development or fuelling conflict. In American popular press, coverage of refugee diaspora youth has tended to either idealize through sympathetic stories about the plight of the so-called "Lost Boys" or auto demonize through panic raising tales of the recruitment of American-based Somali youth into terrorist organizations (Corbet 2001, Farrell 2009, Forliti and Yost 2010).¹

In reality, not much is known about the ambitions of resettled refugee youth or the potential for their involvement in community development either in their countries of origin or resettlement. We should be paying attention, however, as the demographics are striking. According to the 2011 Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) report, "Today one person in every five is between the ages of 15 and 24, with around 85 percent of the 1.2 billion youth worldwide living in developing countries. Furthermore, of the world's 10.4 million refugees, about 35 percent are young people, aged 12 – 24" (5).

This case study focuses on the Sudanese youth diaspora in the United States - specifically Portland, Maine - in an attempt to understand young refugees' perspectives on their situation and their desire and ability to have a voice in the policies and institutions that shape their lives.² In this paper I trace the thread that connects the individual experiences of young Sudanese refugees to the politics and history of their community in Portland. I focus in particular on the cohort of "twenty-somethings."

These young people were resettled to the United States after the age of 13 and had therefore spent considerable time in their country of origin and in neighbouring states in refugee camps or

¹ In the beginning of 1992, approximately 12,000 mostly young Sudanese boys were brought from Lokichoggio on the Sudanese border to Kakuma refugee camp. They were dubbed the "Lost Boys of Sudan", a name borrowed from the children's story "Peter Pan," because they arrived at Kakuma without parents. The previous year, they had wandered through the Sudan after having been expelled from Ethiopia where they had stayed in Itang, Funiyido or Dimma refugee camps in the Gambella region. Many of them had been in these camps since 1986 following months of dangerous travel across Sudan that claimed the lives of reported thousands of young people. According to Bram Jansen, an anthropologist who spent two years in Kakuma, the Ethiopian camps were fabled among Southern Sudanese and rebel fighters, "...for there would be education, food and safety. They would become fabled for a second reason, since education went hand in hand with military training. The groups of boys were simultaneously groups of young recruits taken in by the rebel movement. For young men, the Ethiopian camps were as much a place of refuge as a place of enrollment in the rebel army" (Jansen 2010: 9). Potential previous involvement of the Lost Boys with the rebel movement was not publicized in the United States.

² This research project was generously funded by the UNHCR PDES Small Grants Programme.

urban centres. These dynamic young men and women are actively involved in community building through organizing sporting clubs and programs, spear-heading fund-raising activities for schools in Ugandan refugee camps, speaking for the Save Darfur campaign at venues nationwide and marching in DC, attending leadership trainings, and working with community organizations.

The young people I interviewed are increasingly connected to their global peers through technology. They want to make a difference in other young peoples' lives who are less fortunate - in the refugee camps they know so well, in the places they grew up, and especially in the state of South Sudan. However, they are also frustrated by their situation and the problems faced by their peers who have not fared so well in the United States.

These individual and community stories are in turn connected to city, state, and federal structures and institutions which form the landscape of constraints and opportunities that shape young peoples' participation in American civil society and their communities of concern. These communities of concern are located in such diverse settings as the newly created state of South Sudan, Khartoum, Darfur, Cairo, and Uganda.

The goal of this case study is to map resettled refugee youth participation³ and leadership in a particular context and to discuss how these findings apply to a broader humanitarian youth agenda. It became apparent over the course of this project that UNHCR is in the process of defining a discrete policy for youth. This case study identifies a cohort of young leaders in Maine who, along with their peers in the United States as well as other resettlement countries, have the potential to contribute to the formulation of UNHCR's policy on youth.

Three main questions guide this paper:

1. What does leadership look like among Sudanese youth in Maine? How do Sudanese youth in Maine define leadership and what examples do they provide of successes and failures?
2. What are the factors that support leadership and what are the factors that constrain leadership?
3. What do young people see as the opportunities for community development in Maine and in Sudan?

Background and methods

The population of Maine is 1.3 million according to the 2010 United States Census, of which the immigrant population is more than 55,000 persons (about four per cent), including resettled refugees, asylum seekers, secondary migrants, migrant workers and illegal immigrants

³ I find UNICEF's definition of participation useful as "understood in a programmatic sense, involving young people as active participants in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of sustainable, community-based initiatives" (UNICEF 2004: 3).

(Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project 2010).⁴ Portland, the most populous city in Maine where the majority of Sudanese refugees live, is 98 percent white. Catholic Charities Maine (CCM) is a non-profit organization that resettles refugees under the auspices of the State Department's Office of Refugee Resettlement. Since 1975, CCM has resettled more than 12,000 refugees from Somalia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, Sudan, Djibouti, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Togo, the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries.

More recently, Maine has become a destination for refugees who initially were resettled in a different state and subsequently decided to move to Maine; they are known as "secondary migrants." These secondary migrants wanted to reunite with family members and friends and to improve their quality of life in a state where housing options and employment opportunities were thought to be better (despite bitter, long winters).⁵ It is not certain how many secondary migrants have moved to Maine, but unofficial estimates suggest that as of 2006, it may be as many as 8,000, split primarily between Portland and Lewiston (Allen 2006:3).⁶

Maine's second largest city, Lewiston, figured prominently in the news after a large influx of Somali secondary migrants arrived in 2001. The resident population—homogenous, predominantly Christian—had mixed reactions to this sudden influx. In October 2002, then-Mayor Laurier T. Raymond wrote an open letter addressed to the leaders of the Somali community, warning of the negative impact of the in-migration on the city's social services and requesting that Somali leaders discourage relocation to Lewiston. The letter drew national attention and prompted community leaders and residents to speak out against Mayor Raymond. Demonstrations were held in Lewiston, both in support of and against the Somalis' presence.

In January 2003, a small white supremacist group called the "Creativity Movement" demonstrated in Lewiston against the Somali population, prompting a simultaneous counter-demonstration of about 5,000 people at nearby Bates College. While this show of support temporarily bolstered morale among the Somali population, this series of events has shadowed the settlement process, created a public perception of refugees as dependent, needy, and a drain on resources, and stymied efforts at inter-community mobilization among African groups in Maine.

The African diaspora in Maine is composed primarily of Somalis, Somali Bantus, Sudanese, and those from the Great Lakes region (Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo) who live in Portland and Lewiston. The Sudanese population is organized along tribal lines, the most populous tribes in Portland being the Acholi, followed by the Azande, Nuer, Fur, Dinka, and Nuba (each of which is divided into sub-clans and different linguistic groups).

⁴ Resettlement depends on the willingness of third states to accommodate refugees. With the exception of family reunification, it is only employed in situations of special need or protection: insecurity, gender based violence, women at risk, medical needs, or the absence of possibilities for repatriation and local integration in the foreseeable future for particular refugee caseloads (Jansen 2011:170). In the US there are basically three types of resettlement: individual resettlement on the basis of personal insecurity in the camp or country of asylum, group resettlement, and family reunification.

⁵ According to 2004 State Rankings, Maine's overall crime rate was the 6th lowest in the nation.

⁶ The figure of 8,000 does not include asylum seekers.

There is said to be more than 30 different tribes from Sudan in Maine. Since the early 1990s, more than 20,000 Sudanese refugees have been resettled in the United States, with about a fifth of that population constituting the so-called “Lost Boys” (Shandy 2005: 21). It is difficult to obtain an exact figure for the number of Sudanese people in Maine. Figures vary from 2,000 to 5,000 people, with the most dependable sources estimating around 3,000.⁷ Using a conservative estimate that one person in every five is between the ages of 15 and 24, that gives us a figure of 600 young Sudanese people in Portland.

My background reading on the subject and preliminary conversations with community members identified basic trends among refugee youths in the United States that helped ground my research. Refugee students face language, developmental, and cultural barriers in addition to the normal challenges of class work. For youth who arrive in their late teens with little formal schooling background, they “time out” of the American public school system when they reach the age of 21. These young people fall through the cracks and are vulnerable to recruitment into gangs and involvement with illegal drugs and alcohol.

All states have a program called Job Corps - a U.S. Department of Labour-funded program for low-income young people aged 16-24 - which offers free education and training program to help young people learn a career, earn a high school diploma or GED, and find and keep a good job.⁸ Although there are 124 centres nationwide and two in Maine, neither of them is accessible to the urban based refugee populations in Portland or Lewiston. Learning Works, a Portland-based non-profit, does offer an alternative education program for at risk youth between the ages of 16 – 24 years old. According to their website, “The program includes academics, GED preparation, vocational education, job skills, life skills, and counselling.”⁹

Many are also experiencing increased tension with their parents that may lead to a cultural disconnect and isolation. Jensen and Westoby in their research with Sudanese youth in Australia look at key factors to do with inter-generational strains between young people and elders. They describe models of cultural transition that “indicate that some resettled young people – particularly unaccompanied minors – at least at some stage during their new life, tend to adopt the practices, mores, values and language of the host culture thereby rejecting their culture of origin” (2008: 14). Pressure from various sources to be socially accepted can create barriers between refugee and immigrant youths and their families.

⁷ These estimates are the result of triangulation among various sources, including the president of the Sudanese Community Association who told me that 579 Southern Sudanese adults travelled to Boston to vote in the referendum. I tried to obtain data as to how many Sudanese are in the Portland School system from the Portland Multi-Lingual and Multi-Cultural Center who oversees Portland Public Schools' English Language Acquisition Program for students whose home language is not English. Currently, the Portland school district has over 1,800 students who come from homes where over 60 different languages are spoken. The students represent about 25% of Portland Public Schools' total enrollment; some 1,400 of them are identified as English Language Learners. However, they do not disaggregate their data by country of origin, but rather by language. It is not possible to use language as an indicator for Sudanese origin, as Arabic is also spoken by Iraqi refugees and Kiswahili by Somali and Somali Bantus.

⁸<http://www.jobcorps.gov/home.aspx>

⁹http://www.learningworks.me/programs_youthbuilding.html

As part of my work with Sudanese community leaders—both adults and young people—I have become well acquainted with both sides of the divide.¹⁰ Many adults believe that young people do not listen to them; that they are delinquents in regards to educational attainment, drug and alcohol use, crime rates and teenage pregnancy; and that they no longer are connected to their culture and language.

The young people don't believe that the elders listen to them or care about their opinions and solutions. In conversations I had with young leaders common concerns were voiced, such as: the lack of communication with the police and city/state government; educational attainment (or lack thereof); how to improve the situation for youth who remain in Sudan or neighbouring refugee camps; and how to be heard by parents and community elders. For young women, they are struggling to make sense of changing gender roles and what that means for their lives in terms of dating, marriage, work, and family.

This friction is not particular to refugee groups and is well documented in the literature on immigration (Waters and Ueda 2007, Booth et al. 1997). What makes their situation particularly compelling, however, is that this divide exists in a context of intense pressure to remain connected to home for familial, cultural and political reasons, given the forced nature of their flight from Sudan, the humanitarian crisis back in Darfur, and the new range of opportunities in South Sudan.

At first, my intention was to interview young people between the ages of 15 and 24, the category commonly recognized by the United Nations as “youth.” As I started conducting one-on-one interviews with youth leaders and those who work with them, I began to recognize the complex generational and cultural divides that exist within this age range as well as the diversity of experiences.

According to Pious Ali, director of the Maine Youth Interfaith Alliance (MEIYA), in general Sudanese youth in high school who were born in the United States or came before the age of 13 see themselves as American first, then Sudanese, and then of a certain tribe (if at all).¹¹ They see themselves as teens and have friends across different communities. Their choice of activities is not necessarily based upon immigrant identity.

According to F., a young woman from Darfur, if her younger brothers were asked the question, “who are you?” they would say, “I'm Abdi! Or I'm Mohammed! That's it...The youngest one now, we're trying to teach him...when we came here he was good in his Arabic, even when he speaks, you don't hear any accent in his Arabic, but now he goes to elementary school and when he comes home, anything you ask him in Arabic, he will reply in English. He will just understand but he will never say a whole sentence in Arabic.” (Interview: E, January 2011).

¹⁰ I have been working with refugee and immigrant populations in Maine through research and leadership development activities over the past seven years. From 2007-2010, I was involved in a capacity building project funded by ORR that gathered together three cohorts of refugee leaders from a range of communities (Somalis, Cambodians, Sudanese from over 20 different tribes, Rwandese, Congolese, Azerbaijani, Iraqi, and Somali Bantu) for intensive training in leadership and organizational development. The one issue that consistently united participants despite oftentimes vast differences in language, culture, and education was the widening gap between elders and youth.

¹¹ <http://www.meiya.org/>

The “20 somethings,” like F. quoted above, see the youth who grow up primarily in the United States as lost and struggling to find their way. As John Ochira, a University student told me, “The difference between people who come here younger and those who come here older is that those who come older know what it is to be home. They know what it is to suffer. They know what it is not to have education, not to have money, not to have anything at all. So that’s why this group is a lot more serious” (Interview: January 2011).¹²

Another 20-something, Alfred Jacob, who is seen as a role model by many of the young people I interviewed as well as by his professional colleagues, gave this explanation for the difference between his generation who arrived in the United States later on in life and the generation who is coming of age in Maine:

“Some of them were brought young enough that the U.S. was their first of exposure to life. They were still fighting to define themselves, asking questions like: ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What is my purpose?’ Partly because they came too young and lacked that experience or because they were not exposed so much to the struggle of living in a refugee camp and walking miles and miles and going through the day to day struggle...the focus is more into themselves. That is the teenage life they are going through. Just focusing on right now and what can I get for myself and adopting so much of the American lifestyle (Interview: Jacob, May 2011).”

For the purposes of this case study, I decided to narrow my focus to young people between the ages of 20 and 30. I increased the upper age limit from 25 to 29 years of age, as I found that for Sudanese, 25 was not necessarily the tipping point towards adulthood. Such a change in social status is linked more closely to life course events such as marriage, having children, and moving out of the parental household than it is to a fixed age marker.

My findings are drawn from my interviews with these 20-somethings as well as other community members, social service providers, government officials, and humanitarian workers. I interviewed eight Sudanese youth between the ages of 21 and 30; five interviews were formal, 90 minute recorded interviews. Four of the interviewees were already known to me through a previous leadership project. The other four were recommended to me by a variety of sources; their names just kept coming up in conversations.

The fieldwork took place over a six-month period between November 2010 and May 2011 and consisted of qualitative, ethnographic fieldwork using open-ended interview questions (see Appendix A).¹³I had informal interviews with the current Sudanese Community Association (SCA) President, Mariano Mawein and the former SCA General secretary Edward Loro. These “gate-keeper” interviews were complemented by informational interviews and/or correspondence

¹² Ochira is from South Sudan, not Darfur, but his trenchant assessment of the divide among youth holds true for my work with Darfurian youth.

¹³ Three of the interviewees are young women, five are young men. I also spoke with several people two or three times in order to check facts and fill in gaps in my understanding. I sent the transcripts of the interviews to each interviewee to review and to let them decide if they wanted to be identified by name in the article. All but one were willing. These transcriptions provide the source for quotations. Facebook also provided a source of information, particularly the discussion boards.

with key people working in refugee services in Maine¹⁴ and with individuals working in the Office of Refugee Resettlement (Senior Communications Specialist Lisa Raffonelli), the U.S. Institute of Peace, and UNHCR (PDES, Child Protection Unit, International Protection Education Officer) to learn more about their perspective on youth issues and policy priorities.¹⁵

These interviews and correspondence were supplemented by a literature review in the following areas: ethnographies of Sudanese diasporas in the United States and elsewhere; memoirs written by young resettled Sudanese; books about the Lost Boys including novels, children's books, and monographs; scholarly articles and books in the fields of refugee studies, psychology, anthropology, development studies, immigration studies, adolescent development, and political science; newspaper articles; National Public Radio broadcasts; FaceBook; and reports and resource guides from websites (UN, INGOs, ORR's technical assistance providers, U.S. based resettlement agencies, ethnic community based organizations).^{16,17}

I was interested in the perspectives of young people who were actively involved in leadership activities both in Portland and in Sudan. The interviewees came from four different tribes: Acholi, Fur, Bari, and Pujulu. From my research with the Darfurian population on remittance sending and my leadership work with Sudanese ethnic community based organizations, my connections were deepest with the Acholi and Fur communities. I was able to arrange multiple in-depth interviews with several people in each tribe, which was no small feat given peoples' busy schedules, lags in communication, and Maine's frequent and harsh winter snowstorms. For the purposes of this paper, I have focused in depth on the Fur and Acholi communities and

¹⁴ Catholic Charities' Refugee and Immigrant Services, the City of Portland Refugee Services Office, Portland High School, Portland Public Schools Multi-Lingual and Multi-Cultural Center, the Maine Inter-Faith Youth Alliance, The Telling Room, The Center for Preventing Hate, the Maine Association of Non-Profits, and the State of Maine's office of Multi-Cultural Affairs where the State Refugee Resettlement Coordinator is located.

¹⁵ There are a myriad of community, state, federal, and international organizations who work with youth. There are extensive resources regarding child and youth participation, as compiled in UNICEF's "Child and Youth Participation Resource Guide" which in 2006 organized the large and diverse literature on children's participation. The guide provides a directory of key resources through an extensive annotated bibliography with links to websites, with topics ranging from research ethics to capacity building, to mainstreaming child participation by sector, to participation in governance and public decision making (2006). The UNICEF guide refers to another report, the "Guide to the Global Youth Movement" for youth specific resources.

¹⁶ I reviewed a large breadth of sources as the subject of resettled refugee youth is not one that has been studied much in the United States from an academic perspective. First it was necessary to map out the community dynamics, power struggles, and history in order to contextualize the individual stories. This required a mix of retrospective storytelling, triangulation, and popular press. I then mapped out the opportunities and constraints presented by the structures and institutions at the city and state level. These in turn were articulated with the national perspectives on resettlement from ORR and its technical assistance providers. This particular case study then needed to be brought into dialogue with UN perspectives and priorities regarding youth; particularly refugee youth.

¹⁷ According to their website, "...the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) provides people in need with critical resources to assist them in becoming integrated members of American society." According to Lisa Raffonelli, ORR's senior communication specialist, ORR's guiding principle is "what is best for refugees." The focus for most refugees, including youth, is on health, education (formal and vocational), and employment. Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS) is the Office of Refugee Resettlement's national technical assistance provider on refugee child welfare. BRYCS assists service providers from refugee resettlement agencies, mainstream service agencies, such as child welfare and schools, and ethnic community based organizations.¹⁷ Their goal is to "bridge the gap" between public child welfare and other mainstream organizations, refugee serving agencies, and refugee communities (BRYCS 2009:2).

interviews, although I bring relevant and illuminating information from the other interviews as well.

The two communities also offer good contrast. The Acholis are the most populous tribe in Maine (estimated at 2,000 individuals) and were among the first Sudanese to arrive in Portland as refugees in 1993—one of the interviews is with Lily Angelo whose family was one of the first to arrive. The refugees from Darfur are among the most recent Sudanese arrivals in Portland, with the bulk of the primary resettlers arriving after 2001.

Their population hovers around 120 individuals, which makes them one of the smaller Sudanese tribes represented, along with the Dinka (127 individuals), Nubian (50 individuals), and the minority tribes of who are grouped together into a community organization entitled “Group of Friends” (120 individuals). The following section begins with a description of the history and current dynamics in the Darfur community and then focuses on the perspectives of three young people.

Darfurians in Maine

The Darfurian community in Maine is considered to be the largest group of resettled Darfurians in the United States. I came to know people in the community through interviews on remittance-sending that were part of a research project with colleagues at the Feinstein International Centre.¹⁸ Given the lack of available data, my collaborators and I wanted to test methods of gathering remittance-related data, to map migration and remittance-sending patterns and to explore how linkages between remittance-senders and remittance receivers are established and maintained.

As I learned through my interviews, the journey to the United States began with stepping-stone movement within Sudan, often from Darfur to a major city and then to the capital of Khartoum, once linkages were established to help support the individual or family while in the city. For Darfurians, the closest UNHCR resettlement office is in Cairo. Some received assistance from relatives in Sudan to travel to Cairo, but refugees pre-2001 had to be relatively self-sufficient as the remittance networks were not yet in place in the United States.

Key social relations were created in Cairo that led to resettlement in Portland, with certain families acting as community anchors. Before travel to the United States, approved refugees in Cairo were asked to list the names and contact information for relatives and friends who had already been resettled to the United States. Therefore, it is not surprising that most Darfurians in Portland know one another’s families and have common social connections in Cairo.

At the same time the community is divided internally through politics that predate resettlement to Maine, stemming from a range of factors – identity issues related to peoples’ region of origin in Darfur, perceived or real alliances during the conflict, social status and familial reputation and affiliation with particular clans and sub-groups. I discovered this division firsthand when I was

¹⁸ The remittance project (2006-2008) was designed with colleagues Karen Jacobsen, Helen Young and Abdal Monium Osman at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University in order to investigate remittance-sending activities among a small community of refugees from Darfur in the United States.

effectively blocked from interviewing half of the households in the community during my fieldwork interviews on remittance sending. These schisms stem from political affiliations and orientation toward the conflict in Darfur as well as issues that arose after resettlement in Portland. Most members of the community have an uneasy relationship with “home” that includes paranoia concerning the activities of political groups and potential spies in the United States and political affiliations that result in schisms that effectively divide the Darfur community in Portland into two camps – an aspect that severely constrained my ability to gather information about remittance-sending activities in Portland.

Half of the community would not meet with me because my research assistant was from the opposite camp. The sensitivity of the topic and misconceptions about the purpose of the research discouraged community members from participating as well, even after extensive efforts were made to communicate the goals of the project. As an intensive study of each household in the Portland Darfurian community was not the main goal of the project, we decided not to pursue the issue further. What became clear was that those households where people agreed to be interviewed consisted of members of a large extended family (18 people spread over four households) or were members of the Fur Cultural Revival community organization and active in the Save Darfur campaign.

In general, the Darfurian household heads I interviewed told me that they have many opportunities in the United States and are glad to be in Portland. However, they also conveyed a deep sense of frustration about the limited and low-paying employment opportunities, the high cost of housing, and their inability to save money due to the constant demand for remittances. They want to do everything they can to support their family back home, but it is exhausting. They are also in a delicate position vis a vis the larger Sudanese community.

The January 2011 referendum and events leading up to the referendum spurred a great deal of organizing on the part of the Southern Sudanese community, including a daylong public program titled “Post-referendum Sudan” which brought in outside speakers and influential leaders in Portland for speeches and debate about the future of Sudan. Portland community members tirelessly promoted awareness about the election process and registration among the Sudanese diaspora through individual efforts linked with the electoral commission in Southern Sudan and the local chapter of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM).

The Darfurian population has been in a challenging position on the referendum. They were not allowed to vote in the referendum since they are not from Southern Sudan. Fur Cultural Revival, a community based organization started by members of the Fur community, decided to tone down the tenor and pace of their advocacy work during the referendum process with the international Save Darfur campaign, an alliance of more than 100 faith-based humanitarian and human rights organizations.¹⁹ They were in a difficult situation: they did not want to divert attention or support from the referendum, yet they did not want to lose their focus on the conflict in Darfur and the humanitarian emergency facing the internally displaced people in the Darfur region.

¹⁹ According to Fur Cultural Revival’s website, its mission is “to broaden the public’s awareness of genocide in Darfur, serve the needs of the Darfur community residing in the greater Portland area, and preserve the Fur tribal culture.”

For these first-generation immigrants who are household heads, the findings from the remittance research clearly showed their sense of financial obligation and their desire to nurture and support transnational family relationships. It is less clear how Darfurian youth and grown dependents of these household heads view home and their role in maintaining these social ties.

“I am the bridge between two worlds”: Darfurian youth in Portland

This was the title of F’s letter to the editor at her high school paper several years ago. As she said to me, “People do not understand how it feels to be a bridge between two nations, but I do because I’m Sudanese in the morning and when I’m in school I’m an American...” (Interview, March 2011). Her remarks were in response to my questions about how she sees herself and her connections back to Sudan.²⁰

The pressure to support family and friends “back home” is deeply felt, yet youths are confused about how to fulfill these obligations and are struggling to figure out what “home” means to them. In particular, F. and L., two Darfurian women “20-somethings,” impressed me with their articulate reflections on the gendered and generational aspects of what it means to be Darfurian and the challenges of being a young female leader. The following quote from L., a young woman in her mid-twenties, concerns her relationship with home and is worth reading in its entirety to absorb the power and deep sadness of her words:

Back home...now that’s a very good question. Sometimes I even ask myself what is back home to me anymore...People say to me, “If you never been there, then you’re not supposed to be talking.” They are actually better than me because they at least know something. But even if they have somebody who died or suffered –we all suffer and die! For example, I lived in a place next to Khartoum. It was safe my entire life. But that doesn’t mean we weren’t suffering. We had our own ways of suffering, too! My dad was working for the government, yeah, but he wasn’t making enough money. We didn’t have the best life, having cars, the best clothes, everything. We were just like the people living in Darfur. People from Khartoum, when they know from your paper [identification card] that you are from Darfur, they don’t care. You don’t get a good job. Even in the schools, they don’t care about you...when they say that we weren’t suffering, they were wrong. We even suffered more than them ’cause they were in Darfur! They are all Darfurians! Nobody look at you [in Darfur] and say, “Look at that girl from Darfur – she is walking!” Cause they are all in Darfur! But us in Khartoum, they know you are from Darfur when they look at you. From your face. When you walk and come in and speak Arabic, they don’t say anything, but when they look at the paper [identification card], they say, “Oh, you’re from Darfur! We’ll call you later!” and they never call you back for a job. So we suffered more than the people who were inside Darfur... They just don’t understand that. They think if somebody shoot you or if somebody didn’t shoot you, then the

²⁰ I gave interview transcripts to all the youth I recorded for them to review. I gave them the choice of whether or not they wished to be identified by name. Two of them asked not to be identified, so I have assigned each of them a letter instead.

person who got shot is suffering! It is better to get shot – I know then I am dead. But if you're alive and people look at you like you're dead? We did not have a better life like they think we did.

L, March 2011

F.came to Maine when she was 13. F.'s mother did not grow up in Darfur, nor did F. ever visit Darfur, which has caused her considerable angst since being resettled to Portland and becoming involved with the Save Darfur campaign. They have also found that being female is a constraining factor in their ability to be leaders in their community. John Ochira gives an interesting summary of the difference in acculturation between young men and women:

If you're coming here as a young woman, you're probably very focused on doing all the right things...Young boys tend to be more extreme in taking the American society and living it out...But for girls, the pressure is more to be closer to home. The girls would probably still be in the same mindset as the boys to fully integrate into American life, but the pressure from home keeps the girls a lot closer to home. 17 year old boy, 17 year old girl-the boy can decide to walk away from home, but it's a bit different for the girl. The pressure is more on the girls to stay home and fulfill the roles that are traditionally girls in Sudanese

Ochira, January 2011

As L. recounted to me, she would like to be married to someone her family approves of and have children, but she also wants to finish her education and find a Darfurian man who will respect her:

We want to see something new. So that's why we want to go to school, have an education, try to go back [to Sudan] and change some of the mentality. We're not going to go say, "Oh, women who are married, all this time your husband has been doing you wrong, Divorce him!" No. but we're trying to give them new ideas to refresh their minds. Because if a woman is sick, she cannot get up in the morning and say "You know, please, could you take care of the kids, dress them, they can go to school?" "No!" the husband will say, "No!" He doesn't care if you are sick. He'll just call your mom or your sisters. That is just wrong! Because you are my husband, you are supposed to help me! These are the small things we want to change. If we just go and get married we'll be doing the same thing! We didn't change anything! What's the point of leaving [Sudan]?

L., March 2011

Another young community member, El Fadel Arbab, travels around the country giving speeches about Darfur. Elfadel's speeches at educational institutions, community gatherings, public events, and rallies are aimed at encouraging audience members to take action to end the genocide in Darfur. Having grown up in Darfur, he does not face questions regarding his authenticity. As a young man, he is not criticized for his travels. The process of giving speeches around the country for him has been an important part of his healing process from the traumas of his experiences.

At the age of 12, in 1995, his village in Darfur was attacked by both the Sudanese military and the Janjaweed militia, injuring him and separating him from his family. For the next four years, El Fadel struggled to survive and reunite with his family. Working odd jobs, he made his way to Khartoum, where he lived in a garbage dump with other orphaned children who sold bottles and other materials they scavenged at the dump at the local market. Through contacts at the market he was eventually reunited with his family and made his way to Cairo, where he spent four years waiting to be resettled to the United States. His brother Adam had already been resettled to Portland and Elfadel joined him in 2004.

Despite his lack of formal schooling, El Fadel has become the Secretary and Educator for Fur Cultural Revival, a community based organization started by members of the Darfur refugee community in Portland whose mission is to broaden the public's awareness of genocide in Darfur, serve the needs of the Darfur community residing in the greater Portland area, and preserve the Fur tribal culture. El Fadel works closely with long-time residents who volunteer to help Fur Cultural Revival and the Save Darfur Campaign, which has helped develop his organization's knowledge about American communication, fund-raising, and media presence.

F. and L. have both encountered resistance from others in their community when they give speeches about Darfur. L. told me, "People would say: 'You haven't even been in Darfur! And you think you're a Darfurian and you want to send out a message?' So what if I haven't been there? I am still from Darfur! My dad is from there, my cousins, my uncles, everyone! And when someone asks me, do I say, 'I'm from the north?' No, I say 'I'm from Darfur,' even if I haven't been there. So there are a lot of people who want to put you down in their own way. If they like it or not, if I want to work for Darfur, I will work! They are my people!"

This question of authenticity is a sticking point for many youth, particularly those like L. and F., who are dedicated to raising awareness about the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. Both young women are concerned about the divisions that wrack the Darfurian community in Portland and have been frustrated in their attempts to build relationships with older women in the community or to forge connections with Sudanese youths in other communities in Portland.

E. considers leadership to be more about earning respect than exercising power. "We have leaders, people who pray for us in the *masjid* [mosque] or people in our community that are leaders not because they have so much power, but because they have so much respect from other people around them in their communities...for you to be their role model is to always make sure you give advice to people and listen to what their need is like. So if you get elected a leader you have to make sure you're listening to what your community is in need of, not what you're in need of..." (E., Interview: January 2011).

L. emphasizes the role of a leader as passing on information and teaching others to do for themselves: "Leadership is not someone who just has to get a high seat like the president or the governor. A leader is someone who is walking in the street... I don't think that's leadership if you're sitting and doing nothing. You want to move it on! If you teach me, I teach another person. That's how the community starts to be a community. The community is not about you, it's about everyone else around you. And if you only know something and one day maybe you move, or you're sick, what about everyone else around you? So leadership, it is not just to hold it for yourself-try to pass it on!" (L. Interview, January 2011).

There is an idealized sense of home among the 20-somethings. F. told me that she felt a pull to return to Sudan to get married and to work. I asked her what she thinks she would do in Sudan and this is what she had to say:

We [youth] have to play a big role. I think everybody is looking towards the U.S. after leaving our country for so long – what is the new thing that we’re bringing? I think everybody will just have their eye on U.S., like “OK, are you a doctor now? Are you a teacher?”... You can’t go to America for 8, 9, 10 years and come back empty-handed...If we make that connection with the youth back home then we could have some from the U.S. and some from Sudan go to Darfur and volunteer, help with anything those youth over there need, ‘cause that’s the group we are focusing on – they’re the ones who are faced with the war and the suffering. We want to be able to help them. We have Internet connection there, so if we buy two or three computers and we have meetings we can see each other having meetings together and sharing idea through Facebook and what we want to do and how we can change Sudan. I love that idea.

F., March 2011

This optimism around returning to Sudan is tempered by F.’s and M.’s recognition of women’s roles back in Sudan and their frustration at the breakdown of projects that they tried to start in Portland. F. is resigned to expressing herself through music and poetry for now. “I don’t want to start another Sudanese youth for change organization – it can’t just be me. Others need to take their time and realize that their country is in need of their help...I make sure that I put my voice out there about Darfur in any kind of place I go: a conference, meeting, school, anything. I just use my voice ‘cause I have nothing else to use for now and I think it’s a strong weapon! I’m still working. I’m still in school. I still have a long way to go.”

The Acholi community

Lily Angelo came to Portland with her mother, father, two sisters and two brothers in 1995 when she was 13 years old. She had moved from Khartoum where she had lived all her life, to Cairo where she stayed for three years awaiting resettlement. Her family was one of the first Sudanese to arrive in Maine and she and her siblings were given the nickname, the “Egyptian kids”.

While in high school, she was active in the Institute for Practical Democracy (IPD), a youth program that was active in Sagamore Village, Kennedy Park, Front Street, and Riverton Park from 1996-2009. IPD’s mission was to educate youth from new immigrant families to gain leadership skills to succeed in a democratic, civic society. These students received leadership skills, education for understanding the opportunities and responsibilities of a civic society, understanding, and assistance for preparing for college opportunities and career paths. IPD was named by several interviewees as an influential program in their lives and the lives of other young people.²¹

²¹ <http://responsiblecommunities.org/board-members>

Lily and other classmates used the knowledge they gained in the IPD roundtables to challenge the Portland School system to do a better job with their English Language Learner classes so that “kids could graduate with better skills.” She was also part of the Maine youth legislature in Augusta. Lily studied psychology at the University of Maine in Fort Kent after high school. What makes this remarkable is that Fort Kent is located in Franklin County, the largest and most remote region in Maine that borders Canada. Lily was one of the only Africans in the school—and probably the whole town. She liked it that way. She is currently a language facilitator at Portland High School for the English Language Learner classes where she interprets for students and is a liaison between the school and parents and youth.

During our interview Lily spoke passionately about the intergenerational divide between youth and elders. “In middle school identity becomes a problem. When you’re 14 or 15 it gets hard to live by the rules. The kids are smart! They call the police first and set the tone in the family.” But the same breath, she recalled the stories she was told by her grandmother and cousin before bedtime while growing up in Khartoum. She described the identity crisis she and her sisters went through in their early 20s, related on many levels to their sense of cultural displacement. Lily told me that storytelling, a multi-generational common connection to their cultural beliefs, holds a key for the young people of her community and for other immigrant children as well.

Her family had long been in a leadership role in Portland—her father Angelo Okot was the president of the SCA when he was the victim of a tragic automobile accident in Juba in 2009. This was a double blow to her family, which had suffered the loss of her older brother James Angelo only eight months prior in a still unsolved homicide at Mercy Hospital in Portland where James worked as a security guard. The whole community was in mourning. When James was killed, his father’s public response was, “You know, we came all this way from Sudan to keep these children safe, to give them a chance at a good life, and we get this. After the funeral and the mourning, we will sit down with some people and discuss, strategize what we need to give these children a better chance at growing up” (Mares-Hershey 2009).

Two years later, there is still anger about the shooting and the handling of the situation by the Portland Police department. The passing of two key community figures within the same family within the same year had a huge impact upon the Sudanese community and led to meetings with Governor Baldacci and the police department. It also inspired youth to come together and the summer of 2008 saw the formation of Sudanese Youth For Change, a youth-led organization whose goal was the bring unity among Sudanese youth and to press for better communication with the police department. A key member of Sudanese Youth for Change was a young Acholi man named John Ochira.

John Ochira was born in 1988 in a village in Southern Sudan near the Ugandan border. He spoke Acholi at home as well as Arabic and Kiswahilli. As the youngest of eight children, he was the only one of his family not have been born in Uganda where they had fled during the war. He was raised with his aunts and uncle. He “tried to live by all the rules so he didn’t get into trouble much.” Although his uncle was one of the school teachers in town, John didn’t go to school much because it was right near the hills where the LRA was stationed during the war. They would make raids and kidnap children. His mother farmed down south near the border and that’s where he spent much of his time. He left Sudan with his family to go to the Kiryandongo refugee camp in Uganda in 1999.

The Kiryandongo refugee settlement was one of many. By the mid-1990s, Uganda was hosting around 250,000 refugees, of whom 170-180,000 still remained in the country in early 2006. John went to school there for five years, which was much better than his school situation in Sudan as he could attend school regularly and they had text books and materials. The camp was really dirty – there was an outbreak of cholera and he couldn't believe his brother survived. He attended public school in Kiryandongo refugee camp from 1999-2004 and then went to private school in Kampala for a year, funded by his brother who brought him to Portland in 2005 through the family reunification program.

At first he couldn't talk to the guidance counsellors at Deering High School, as they couldn't understand him, but after two weeks they mainstreamed him into honors classes except for English. John and fellow student started a group called "Students Without Borders" at Deering High School in December 2006 which brought youth together to fund-raise to support refugee students in the Kiryandongo refugee camp.²² He had a school advisor who guided him and the other students through the process. John graduated in 2008 and then attended Merrimack College in Massachusetts.

After a year it proved to be too expensive and he took a job with AmeriCorps VISTA²³ where he worked for the Portland Housing Authority (PHA).²⁴ In Portland, refugees tend to live in four major housing projects: Sagamore Village, Kennedy Park, Front Street, and Riverton Park. Three of them have study centres established and run by the PHA. As a VISTA volunteer, John worked at one of the study centres and then separately worked with individual students on use of computers for a private company, Brilliance Academy. He also coached soccer and helped to organize the summer soccer league, which is a big draw for Sudanese youth. John has also been active in community issues.

He, along with other interviewees, started Sudanese Youth for Change in the wake of the tragic shooting of James Angelo. Youth for Change started with great attendance and motivation among youth. Once a president was elected, however, it became clear that there were real divisions among the youth as to the groups' mission. Some wanted to focus first on building cohesiveness among Sudanese youth across tribal divisions through social events. Others wanted to focus on the community's relationship with the police. And other group wanted to focus on development projects in Sudan and refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

Education and unity were recognized as priorities, but there was disagreement as to how and where projects would take place. In the midst of these disagreements, Angelo Okot was killed in a car accident in Sudan and the youth lost their champion. Angelo had been attending their meetings and advocating for them and in his absence, Youth for Change no longer had an

²² Students Without Borders has a presence on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Students-Without-Borders/142620344656#!/pages/Students-Without-Borders/142620344656?sk=info>

²³ Americorps VISTA is the U.S. national service program designed specifically to fight poverty. VISTA volunteers serve full-time for a year at a nonprofit organization or local government agency. <http://www.americorps.gov/>

²⁴ The Portland Housing Authority's mission is to provide decent, safe, and sanitary housing for low-income citizens of the greater Portland area. They administer U.S. Department of Public Housing and Urban development (HUD) public housing and Section 8 Housing Programs which offer assistance to low income households. <http://www.porthouse.org/publicHousing/sites.html>

advocate among the elders. Despite attempts over the years to resuscitate Youth for Change, it remains defunct.

John tends to be quiet, but when he speaks about leadership, his voice takes on a strong, passionate tone. He compares leadership back in Sudan with what he has learned in the United States: “In South Sudan I thought leadership - I mean community leadership - did not exist. They had military leadership. Where I lived, the rebel groups, the LRA were so brutal. We had local boys who organized themselves to go and fight the rebel groups coming to attack us in the south. That kind of leadership was very common. Leadership at home is predominantly related to age. If you are old, you are seen as a credible leader. If you are not old, you’ve got no experience. Therefore you cannot lead. The things that I do here [Maine], if I was in Sudan trying to do it or Uganda trying to do it, I couldn’t... In Portland, particularly at this time, you’re in luck to exercise your leadership skills and gain more experience and grow in the process and that sets you up to be a different kind of leader back home” (Ochira: Interview, January 2011).

John told me about his friend, Aruna Kenyi, and as soon as I heard more about his story and accomplishments, I knew I had to interview him. He is from the Bari tribe, which is one of the minority tribes in Portland. He came to Virginia through refugee resettlement in 2005 at the age of 14. He and his three brothers and his sister-in-law moved as secondary migrants to Portland a year later to be close to friends they had made in Kyangwali refugee camp in Uganda.

Kenyi was quickly moved from ELL classes to mainstream classes, graduated from Portland High School, and attended community college for one year before transferring to University of Maine in Farmington, where he is one of three Sudanese students on campus out of a student population of 2,200. Kenyi began writing his story when he was 15 with the help of the Telling Room, a non-profit writing centre based in Portland where kids go after school for help with homework and to learn to write from staff and volunteers. Inspired by Valentino Achak Deng, another Lost Boy whose story was told by Dave Egger’s in his 2006 book, *What is the What*, Kenyi published his own memoir, *Between Two Rivers*, in 2010.

Like Deng, Kenyi was inspired to return to Sudan to make a difference. He is currently studying community health and has decided to start a school lunch project in his home village of Kansuk, in the region of Kajo Keji, over his 2011 summer break. “That idea just comes to me ‘cause when I was back there, we go to school and we don’t really eat anything at school. We start classes at eight in the morning and go to four in the afternoon and we don’t eat anything. Compared to here, where I go to school in the morning and I see food and then we eat lunch and then we go home and eat dinner...”

Like the other young people I spoke to, he feels a keen sense of wanting repay the debt of kindness he received on the way. “I was helped a lot to get to this country, especially from the UN and Catholic Charities and all the case workers...I see people do things and I think I could do similar to help and contribute to society. I just want to go back home and show people that there are people who are out [of Sudan], but that they do care about them. Those people who are in America, Europe, Australia-some are living the life like they don’t care about people back home, but that’s not the thought that everybody has. We’re working hard to bring change back home. It is a new country now and it needs development, so it’s going to take us to develop it, not any other person”

He has been more frustrated trying to get projects started in Maine. “We created a Facebook group for Sudanese youth explain just a way that we are communicating with each other and share ideas. But it was not successful.” He also shared his belief that it is not tension with adults that is preventing youth initiatives from succeeding: “There are many resources out there, but we won’t get them because we don’t have the connections and we don’t have the support...It is not all about the adults-you cannot always depend on them-we can do things our own way. We can’t be complaining, crying out that we are not getting support from our elders. They are as vulnerable as we are! Maybe even more vulnerable because they don’t know this culture! But we grew up here, we know and learned from it-we should be the one to support them, not them supporting us!

Kenyi provides a definition that brings attention to the collaborative aspects of leadership: “Being a good leader is about being a good listener and being able to see what is around you and to get it done. Leadership is being able to work with others, communicate with others, and cooperate with others. Not everyone is born with those qualities-we all have to learn from the environment.”

The final youth interviewee is Alfred Jacob. Alfred is a new father, works two jobs, and still manages to have his fingers in numerous community projects in Maine and Sudan. He is currently an Acholi-language Parent and Community Specialist at the Portland Schools Multilingual and Multicultural Center and a program educator for Cultivating Community.

At age 28 he has moved out of his families’ house and has a wife and a child, yet my sense from speaking with him and others youth is that he is yet on the cusp of adulthood. He is respected by young people and looked up to for his many accomplishments in the areas of employment, community leadership, and successful community projects in Portland and Sudan. He is also taken seriously by the elders in the Sudanese community, as he is one of the leaders of Aserela, a community organization started by Acholis in Portland in 1999 that Alfred credits as “bringing everyone together” when the numbers of Sudanese began to grow (Interview, January 2011).

“I’ve been involved with Aserela doing the doing the fund-raising for our school building projects. We built a school in Uganda in 2000 in Kiryandongo camp. Now we’re building a second one. The school is in Kite, a village right on the road between Juba and northern Uganda. Our security guard for the school in Kiryandongo moved to Kite and told us that there are over 13,000 people living in the city and there is no secondary or elementary school in the area. The community gave the land for the school. I’m the one who went over to Sudan and [supervised when they] laid the foundations and the structure this past summer. The school will open in August and run as an elementary school up to middle school and we hope that by next year we can expand to a high school” (Interview, May 2011).

In addition to the construction of the school building itself, Alfred is also working on creating a library. He went to Juba University’s library and was very disappointed. According to Alfred, “It has long years of existence, but the library itself is not as rich as it should be. I was discouraged so I’m hoping that part of this campaign that I will be running in September will be to build something to the standard that not only the school will use, but the community and the whole

county can use it for their research. I'll be fund-raising through Aserela to support that school. I'm now working to develop some partnership with both the schools and the Portland public library to push this thing" (Interview, May 2011).

Alfred is one of the names everyone knows or suggests as a good contact person. He was resettled to Portland in 1999 at the age of 16 from Cairo, where he and his family had fled after leaving South Sudan. "I grew up in Juba where I had gone through numerous ambushes...In the war time everything was turned upside down-it didn't look like a city...it was like a protective barricade. You were always looking for a better place to go hide yourself because you never knew how it was going to break out at any time. My family moved to Khartoum and we had a chance to come to Cairo. I was there from 1997-1999."

Alfred graduated from Portland High School in 2003 and was part of a strong cohort of Sudanese youth and was one of the leaders in starting the Portland United Soccer League, which brings together young adults from immigrant communities in Portland during the summer months.

"The group that I came up with, a lot of them came from Kakuma, so many of them had gone through the cycles—the starvation, facing the difficulties, the experience of the refugee had been gone through fully. A lot of them have really high ambitions—they really want to be somebody! And every single one of those kids has graduated from college or is still in college. One of my friends is now doing her PhD. in Anthropology in California...They were the role models! When you came in, you wanted to follow in their footsteps because of the high expectations that they had. The ambition they carried with them is what laid the stage. Now the kids who are coming up right now, those kind of expectations have faded away..." (Interview, May 2011).

For Alfred, leadership is about setting an example. "People will be able to follow that step you lay ahead of you—you don't have to be the one directing things, but be able to set up the expectations so that people will say, 'oh, I can also compete like this person.' Or, 'I can also do something the same like this person'" (Interview, May 2011).

He credits his cohort's success in part to having good mentors. Like Lily Angelo, Alfred references the Institute for Practical Democracy (IPD) as providing key support and skills. "IPD focused a lot more on immigrant kids like: Cambodians, Sudanese, Croatians, Somali, and Vietnamese. That program helped out a lot! It brought the kids together who had a lot of different qualities and helped them to process their thinking and mentor them to begin to look at what is right and what is wrong and how they can begin to go about addressing it. IPD allowed them to express themselves on issues that were affecting them. They acted different—more driven, more focused, and had a place to go" (Interview, May 2011).

Alfred didn't attend IPD programs himself, as they were at an end when he was in high school. For Alfred, he was driven by a compulsion to give back and at Aserela found an outlet for his energy and a place to gain experience fund-raising and organizing.

In addition to the Aserela school projects, Alfred is also organizing a shipment of medical supplies to South Sudan. He is mentoring other youth in the process. "I'm doing it through the Acholi community in Portland to the county hospital in Juba. We're getting the supplies from an

organization in Maine, Partners for World Health.²⁵ We're trying to get some information from the hospital to see what supplies they need and from the county to see if the county can get it from Mombasa and overland to South Sudan...We're working with a group of young people within the community to make the medical project happen who are high school and older" (Interview, May 2011).

Alfred sees the absence of a common meeting place as one of the biggest challenges to emerging youth leadership. "It's hard to do a community initiative without having a place, a resource for community to rely on. It could be a café or a community centre, someplace where youth know they can come and hang out with their buddies and get some support or information about the things that are happening in their communities. But those things are not in place, so no matter what you do, it's always just talk. A lot of youth are at the stage where they are just done. There cannot be much action when every single time you have to beg for a place."

Through Aserela, Alfred is working on getting space at Front Street, one of the affordable housing sites. "I hope it will become the central place if they have a difficulty at home and they want some support, they will come there...Any emergency gathering we'll have a place to go and sit down and talk" He currently offers a civic class for seniors and would like to have a consistent space where he could expand the language arts classes he offers to middle-school Acholi youth.

Conclusion

For youth, their presence in a community centre would symbolize that they are being taken seriously and being given a seat at the table in terms of community development. We hear in their voices that they are trying their best through small successes and set-backs to gain insight into windows of opportunity that exist within the gerontocracy of their cultures and sense of purpose that would help them to create allies.

Any of the young people I interviewed would tell you that education is the cornerstone of their ability to be a leader. Each of them found key mentors during their high school years, whether they were teachers, community activists, elders who lead community organizations or are community leaders, or employers. Each of them feels compelled to finish college, find a good job, speak out about issues in their community, and contribute back to their communities of concern.

This is not to say that all Sudanese youth are doing as well. The young people I interviewed would be quick to say that there are many problems troubling the Sudanese community across all tribes. Three of the young people I interviewed are part of the youth advisory group for the Disproportionate Minority Contact assessment and identification program, which was established

²⁵ Partners for World Health is a non-profit organization based in Portland Maine that receives useful medical supplies that U.S. hospitals must discard due to government regulations and distributes them to organizations and people around the world. http://www.partnersforworldhealth.org/Home_Page.html

in 2009 to address the overrepresentation of minority youth at various stages in the juvenile justice system in Maine.²⁶

These young people are eager to shift the rising trend of young Sudanese coming into contact with the law, of high school drop-outs, of violence and confrontation with the police, of drug and alcohol abuse, of young pregnant women dropping out of school. Their stories relate a history of attempts to address these issues in different ways. Some have been more successful than others. Five are still in school: John and Aruna attend University of Maine Farmington. L. and F. attend community college in Portland. El Fadel recently quit his job to focus on his English skills in classes at Portland Adult Education and his speaking engagements on behalf of Fur Cultural Revival (a community based organization in Portland started by members of the Darfur community) and the Save Darfur campaign.

Another just quit his job to start a Master's degree program in Development Policy and Practice at University of New England and will be travelling to Juba in August 2011 for an eight month internship. His goal is to introduce a student internship program at Juba University, where students will be placed with government agencies, businesses, and non-profits in order to gain supervised work experience so as to make them more attractive to employers upon graduation.

Each of these leaders have gone through the American educational system and can merge their newly acquired skills with their sense of being Sudanese and being accountable to those they left behind. This powerful combination of skills has already been tested by other Sudanese youth who came to the U.S. as refugees, the most visible of whom are former "Lost Boys."²⁷ Like them, the young leaders I spoke with have found key mentors and organizations where they can practice and grow their skills.

F. wrote a poem while in high school that she has recited in many venues and most recently recorded as part of an album produced for her singing group in Portland. I find it significant that she has revised this poem over the years, illustrating the internal conflicts and shifts in perception that young refugees experience as they move away from an idealized vision of Sudan and "home" to a more nuanced understanding of their situation. It is this understanding, this ability to balance while keeping a foot in both worlds, that should be better understood. Their views on what helped them to succeed and what can be done to develop youth leadership has much to offer refugee youth worldwide.

²⁶ For the most recent report on Disproportionate Minority Contact in Maine: DMC Assessment and Identification: http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/justiceresearch/Publications/Juvenile/Juvenile_DMC_AssessmentandIdentificationReport2009.pdf

²⁷ Valentino Achak Deng may be the most well-known of the "lost boys". His story was told by Dave Eggers in the best-selling novel *What is the What*. Deng and Eggers established the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation after the publication of the book. The foundation's mission is to increase access to education in post-conflict Southern Sudan by building schools, libraries, teacher-training institutes, and community centers. The Foundation's constructed and supports an 18-structure educational complex in Valentino's hometown of Marial Bai, Southern Sudan which opened in May 2009, and is the first high school in the entire region. Another "lost boy" Salva Dut, founded a non-profit called Water for Sudan Inc. in 2004 that drills borehole wells which bring safe drinking water to the people in Southern Sudan's remote villages. A Dinka from Tonj in southwest Sudan

E's poem, Version One

*Sudan
My home, my homeland, my country
My love
Surrounded by beauty
Darfur surrounded by beautiful people*

E's poem, Version Two

*I speak for the thousand people who don't have a voice in Darfur
I speak for the thousand mothers who have been speaking forever, but no one is listening
Sudan, beautiful home is ruined
Ruined only by us and fixed only by us, by our unity*

The “twenty-something” youth cohort described above is a resource to be tapped as UNHCR develops a discrete policy on and for refugee youth. They are savvy about how systems work, they have advanced education, they are knowledgeable about the democratic process, civil society, and human rights, and they are familiar with technology and the potential to link with youth world-wide. Their retrospective views on growing up as a refugee would be invaluable as they have now have some distance (physically, temporally, and emotionally) from their experiences and who now live in countries where there is a strong democratic, rights-based system.

UNHCR's network of researchers in resettlement countries could be called upon to train key members of this “20 something” cohort in research techniques (interviewing, qualitative and quantitative data gathering) as well as in protection issues in order to develop a research protocol for these retrospective interviews with resettled youth. Young researchers could also be trained to conduct the interviews themselves. They could conduct such interviews in the refugee camps and urban centres where they lived, returning as UN volunteers.

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Appendix: Youth leadership questionnaire

Gather migration history of coming to US and basic demographic questions (age, tribe, educational status, work status, marital status, dependents, family members)

How do you define leadership?

How do you define youth?

What does it mean to be a young leader in Portland?

What does it mean at home?

What are positive examples of social entrepreneurship for peace-building currently underway that are being led by young Diaspora leaders?

How connected are you to youth in other states?

What do you see as opportunities for youth here in Portland and in Maine? What helped you along the way?

What do you see as the constraints? What made it difficult?

What is your relationship with elders in the community? When will you become an elder/respected?

What policies/programs could support youth?

What did city/schools/community offer youth?

Where did you get the idea for going back to Sudan? What is the project?

Who has supported you?