



Date: 23/10/2020

Issues facing diaspora communities in Australia

To: The Senate Committee

From: Ring Mayar, elected President, South Sudanese Community Association in Victoria (SSCAV)

My answers to your additional questions on my experience with government and how I see that being improved are as follows.

CHAIR: I do note that the secretariat will send you the transcript of the questions that were put to the community of South Sudan and other marginalised areas in New South Wales. You have highlighted some of the issues for diaspora communities. In terms of how, going forward, you would deal with some of the government departments differently if you could—obviously in Melbourne there have been recent issues. I'm interested in your experience with government and how you see that being improved?

1 HANSARD, p. 20

*CHAIR: I have a question about government funding, and we've had discussions with previous witnesses in relation to **how you liaise with DFAT or with any of the other government departments. We would be interested in that for our report. Are you able to comment on that?***

My answer:

After my election as the President of SSCAV in 2018, I tried to reach out to the Federal and Victorian Governments. I wrote a letter to the Prime Minister and I was prepared to travel to Canberra to meet him and discuss pertinent issues in my community. I was told the government had other priorities at the time.

I wrote several letters to the Hon Peter Dutton requesting a meeting to discuss key issues of concern in my community. I was referred to Hon David Coleman. His office acknowledged my request however I never had the opportunity and meet and discuss.



Regarding the Victorian Government I met with the Victorian Minister for Multicultural Affairs and senior officials in the Department of Premier and Cabinet, early in my office and received no ongoing support for or recognition of my executive position. I presented the issues relating to women, young people and seniors in our community.

Early in my term I introduced my entire new senior executive officers to the Chairperson of the Victorian Multicultural Commission at the government offices. I was shocked and devastated in the following year when I, my elders and Office Bearers were sidelined by the senior government representatives who appeared to be influenced by a few members of the South Sudanese community in Victoria who were not members of SSCAV. The Victorian Government officials were selective in who they chose to engage with, whilst rejecting all my invitations to SSCAV events.

*CHAIR: Thank you very much for that, Mr Atem. I might just go back to my question, which was around liaison or your dealings with federal government departments. **With DFAT, for example—we've had previous witnesses and certainly some of the submissions suggest there might be an amelioration or improvement in the way that diaspora communities deal with DFAT or with other government agencies, so we're interested in that. Also in funding—securing government funding, for example. Would you be able to comment on that?***

My answer:

Securing funding is one of the most important items. I was surprised during the handover from the previous SSCAV Chairperson in 2018, to find out that the registration of the SSCAV incorporation was frozen at Consumer Affairs Victoria by a small group of disgruntled South Sudanese Australians who were not members of SSCAV, but were employed in government agencies and service providers.

The improvements I suggest are that the Victorian Government should remain impartial and not take sides. The government should provide capacity building, support and recognition for new and emerging communities such as SSCAV. The reality was that SSCAV under my leadership was prohibited from access to funding for youth justice support, parenting support, life and social skills coaching, support for intergenerational engagement, and support for school students and dropouts.

A suggested solution is for the Government to use the funds allocated to the South Sudanese community in Victoria to provide a centre for SSCAV in the western suburbs of Melbourne to help to provide such services to assist them to integrate in the Australian society.

2 HANSARD, p. 20

*Senator ABETZ: Thank you, Chair. I have three quick points. First of all, I agree with the submission of the Community of South Sudan and Other Marginalised Areas Association NSW about the importance of having English language skills. I think that really needs to be emphasised more and more because that is the pathway to avoid exploitation and, on the positive side, to ensure that full engagement within our community can be achieved. **Could I ask the South Sudanese Community Association in Victoria—on the commentary that you made about the South Sudanese diaspora youth finding it difficult to obtain employment, is that***



something that is just specific to the South Sudanese community, or are there other migrant/refugee communities that suffer from a similar issue?

My answer:

The unemployment challenges facing young Victorians from South Sudanese background were exacerbated by excessive and repeated negative media reporting about African gangs and break-ins that were perpetrated by a small minority. Over time it was difficult for the community reputation to recover from this. Tragically many young people in our community committed suicide and for some, their lives or others fell apart.

3 HANSARD, p. 21

*Senator ABETZ: Right. Thank you very much for that. Allow me to ask a very sensitive question, and I'd be interested in your insights and response to it. I enjoy a very good relationship with the South Sudanese community in my home state of Tasmania, and there do not seem to be the 'problems' in my home state of Tasmania with the South Sudanese community that, as expressed in your submission, you're experiencing in Victoria. **What do you think the specific situation is with the South Sudanese youth community in Victoria, as opposed to, I think, nearly every other state and territory, where these difficulties are not being experienced?***

My answer:

First of all, the South Sudanese population in Victoria is larger than in Tasmania and other states, and therefore more ethnically diverse, as South Sudan is made of 64 tribes.

SSCAV conducted extensive community consultations with our youth and the difficulty for us was that government funded multicultural youth agencies sidelined us. They did not target the most vulnerable youth, even though we offered to provide assistance, and giving them access to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of youth that are often hard to reach.

4 HANSARD, p. 22

*Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: As a former minister and having had a longstanding association in the multicultural space, most especially coming as I do from New South Wales, I'd like to come at this from a different angle. **Can you tell me how the intra-community tensions are going, particularly given that many in your community continue to have strong ties back to South Sudan and some of the political situation in South Sudan and the issues that gave rise to a lot of people fleeing from South Sudan?***

My answer:



Of course, the rising tensions in South Sudan, as fighting escalated once more in 2016, impacted on the community in Victoria. The solutions we found for the disagreements in our community, were for the younger generation of South Sudanese professionals, who went to school and studied at university in Australia, to use the Australian democratic and legal system. These young professionals in their 20s and 30s set up a constitutional, democratic election process for SSCAV. That's when I was elected in March 2018. We as the younger Australians, were not so concerned about intra-ethnic in-fighting in the South Sudanese community as we identified as Australians. What disappointed us after six months of work on the democratic SSCAV election, was that the Victorian government supported and favoured a disgruntled minority of South Sudanese Australians, who worked in the government and in government funded service providers and were not even financial members of SSCAV.

My newly appointed SSCAV executives of young emerging professionals, in the fields of law, accounting and policing, needed still needed capacity building and governance support. We expected multicultural service providers and the government to assist us with this rather exclude us.

5 HANSARD, pp. 23-24

*Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: Australia is a multicultural country. The South Sudanese community is not the first and it won't be the last community to have its members coming to Australia and facing tensions. Most communities in Australian history have shown that it takes about 30 or so years for a good integration of communities. Having said that, along the way, many communities—and larger communities—including the Italian Australian community of which I am part of even though I was born here in Australia, have faced tensions, have faced issues. We saw that in the 1980s with Griffith and allegations about mafia and all sorts of issues associated with that. But what is really important and what history has shown us is that each of those communities had the willingness and the intention of the leadership of those communities to work together to overcome their problems. The few bad apples tainted the good name and the good legacy of those who took the step to come to Australia to make a home for themselves and for their children. **So my question to you is: have you taken the opportunity to reach out to other communities that have faced problems in the past and talk to them about the opportunities?***

My answer:

Yes, I have worked closely with the Vietnamese community in the western suburbs of Melbourne and with the Jewish community in the eastern suburbs, that really helped us in the past two years. I also built good relationships with other African community organisations such as the Somali, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Oromo.

Our main obstacles, as I mentioned previously were the inexplicable exclusion, that we experienced at the government level and multicultural youth service provider level.

I note your comment about government involvement and government support, but government giving money and government support don't engender willingness for different



views to be set aside in the name of peace and harmony. That's a comment, and I'm happy for you to take that on notice.

The other question that I have is: many of your community members are dual citizens. I remember when I was Minister for International Development and the Pacific I had opportunities to meet with senior officials and ministers from South Sudan. One of the concerns I think you need to face is the prospect that continued breaches of Australian law will eventually result in, potentially, deportation of your people back to South Sudan. Having watched this in many communities over almost 40 years, I think there is a responsibility on the senior leadership of your communities to actually take a much more proactive engagement to ensure that, if there are intercommunity tensions and those intercommunity tensions are resulting in breaches of the law—I think that in the end those people are going to create an even broader problem for many, for the overwhelming majority of law-abiding citizens in your community.

My answer:

During my leadership in SSCAV I worked tirelessly at the grassroots level to gain the trust of young people at risk in my community, and with the magistrates' courts. With my team of Office Bearers, elders, we found solutions to engage with the law courts, with our families and young offenders however the lack of funding and the so-called restrictions imposed on us by the Victorian Government limited our ability to make a bigger impact in these areas.

Signature

Ring Mayar | President

South Sudanese Community Association in Victoria (SSCAV) Inc.

Website: www.sscavinc.com