



## Cooking class for young African men

Survivors of Torture and Trauma Assistance and Rehabilitation Service,  
Bowden, South Australia

*This project also relates to:*

➤ Education

➤ Health

The project aimed to improve the nutrition, health and wellbeing of young male Sudanese refugees living in Adelaide by teaching them how to prepare and cook food.

The cooking and nutrition classes provide an opportunity for social interaction with the local Sudanese community, help participants rediscover their cultural identity and assist in the adjustment and settlement process.

The project commenced with a minimal commitment of resources in 2005. The Survivors of Torture and Trauma Assistance and Rehabilitation Service (STTARS) provided \$100 to pay for ingredients and found a hall with a kitchen attached at the Magdalene Centre, a community centre in central Adelaide. The Sudanese community and the Magdalene Centre became partners in the project.

The Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs through the *Local Answers, Stronger Families and Community Strategy*, now provides the funding.

### Identifying a need

The idea for the African cooking class came about during a conversation with two Sudanese community workers, Ayen Kuol and Martin Monydeng, about a family of boys that had gone hungry for several days because they had not known how to cook the food left in their cupboard and fridge.

The young men, all unaccompanied minors, had lived in refugee camps, had lost close family members and lacked access to the community support structures. While they had access to food and cooking facilities, they did not know how to shop or prepare nutritious food.

The young men's interaction with the local community in Adelaide and with other members of the Sudanese community was limited. They lacked confidence and were afraid to ask for help.

### Informal discussion with the community

STTARS suggested a cooking class and offered financial assistance and support. When the idea was discussed within the community, Ayen and her cousin Nyiel volunteered to teach the boys how to cook. The first cooking class was held two weeks later. Four young men aged between 15 and 18 years attended.

### Lengthening the project

Initially the plan was to run the group for a trial period of eight weeks, the only objective being to respond to an immediate need expressed by a couple of concerned members of the Sudanese community.

Unexpectedly, the project took on a life of its own because it proved to be not only a successful way of teaching young people life skills, but also an opportunity for young people to make friends and support each other through some of the difficulties of resettlement. The project's timeframe was extended and STTARS was able to secure project funding to employ Ayen full time.

### The cooking classes

The cooking classes were conducted in the kitchen of the Magdalene Centre on Saturday mornings. STTARS workers approached several young Sudanese males to join the group. When the project was funded two Sudanese workers initially ran the classes. They spoke Dinka but were not professional cooks. The students were taken to a nearby market and familiarised with local foods. Some of the refugees had never seen a cauliflower or tomatoes before and thought that prawns were insects.

The classes were never held for a 'closed' enrolled group and so the number of students changed from week to week.

Participants were actively involved in selecting and purchasing food products. In the kitchen, cooking was 'learning by doing' and covered all aspects of meal planning, preparation, cooking, washing up and eating together. The learning environment was informal and flexible, with STTARS staff serving as mentors.

Members of the group sang and told stories while they worked because they realised the value of social interaction around the cooking. Recipes included both Sudanese traditional dishes and Australian meals.

### Generating community support

The group began to generate interest among the broader Sudanese community in South Australia and expanded to include a small number of Sudanese girls. Around this time it also began to attract several older women in the community who volunteered to help with the group and as act as mentors to the young people. Gradually this network of support in the community built and expanded until STTARS involvement was no longer needed.

Since March 2007, the cooking class has been overseen and managed by older women from the Sudanese community who work as volunteers. It is funded by donations from the participants. STTARS has let the community know it is still willing to help if needed.

On Saturdays when the classes are held, the Magdalene Centre has become an important meeting place for the community where young people gather and prepare a meal together.

### Unexpected outcomes

**Sudanese Women's Dance Group:** The older women involved as mentors for the boys in the cooking classes approached STTARS and requested support for them to meet separately each week to socialise and participate in traditional Sudanese dance. They wanted to include those women in the community who were isolated and needed support and a more immediate connection with the Sudanese community.

STTARS agreed to fund a facility and worker time and the Sudanese Women's Dance Group was born. Within 12 months this group had become focused, purposeful, self-directing and able to articulate and achieve common goals.

**Sudanese Women's Group:** As a result of bringing the women together in the cooking classes and dance group, the idea was born for the Sudanese Women's Group. Isolated Sudanese women now meet regularly to share stories, experiences, dance, food and Sudanese cultural practices. STTARS still provides basic support but the women are working towards generating their own income through dance performances.

### Support group for Sudanese tertiary students:

A support group for Sudanese tertiary students now meets regularly in a forum to motivate one another, link resources and share information. This group was initiated and is coordinated by one of the original boys who attended the cooking class.

### Evaluating the project

This was not a project 'owned' by STTARS. It is important to recognise that it is a project generated in partnership with the community. STTARS' role was that of facilitator and broker.

STTARS has undertaken a qualitative evaluation using a 'snapshot' approach. A worker visits participants and engages them in a conversation to ask them to describe their life and community before and after these lessons and meetings started. They are asked what activities they found useful and how STTARS can continue to assist their community.

### Achievements

Over the course of the 18 months that STTARS funded and staffed the project, approximately 140 young people and their family members were assisted.

At the end of the project, groups of young Sudanese men were competent in selecting, purchasing and cooking basic Sudanese and Australian foods. The project was so successful that it has been promoted in other Sudanese communities.

The youths engaged with the local Sudanese community through the project, and were able to share with them their personal experiences before arriving in Australia, and the settlement challenges they faced. A program participant, Guor (Peter), said:

I was not only going for cooking, I was going to chat with people. I was sharing stories of losing friends and family. We are talking about the future. It is a place for shaping people.

## Profile > Alier

**Alier** was 28 years old when interviewed and had been living by himself since the age of nine. He was one of the 'Lost Boys of Sudan', orphans forced from their villages by war to trek across the country. Alier said:

We were 50 000 but many died on the way – were drowned, eaten by wild animals or shot by soldiers.

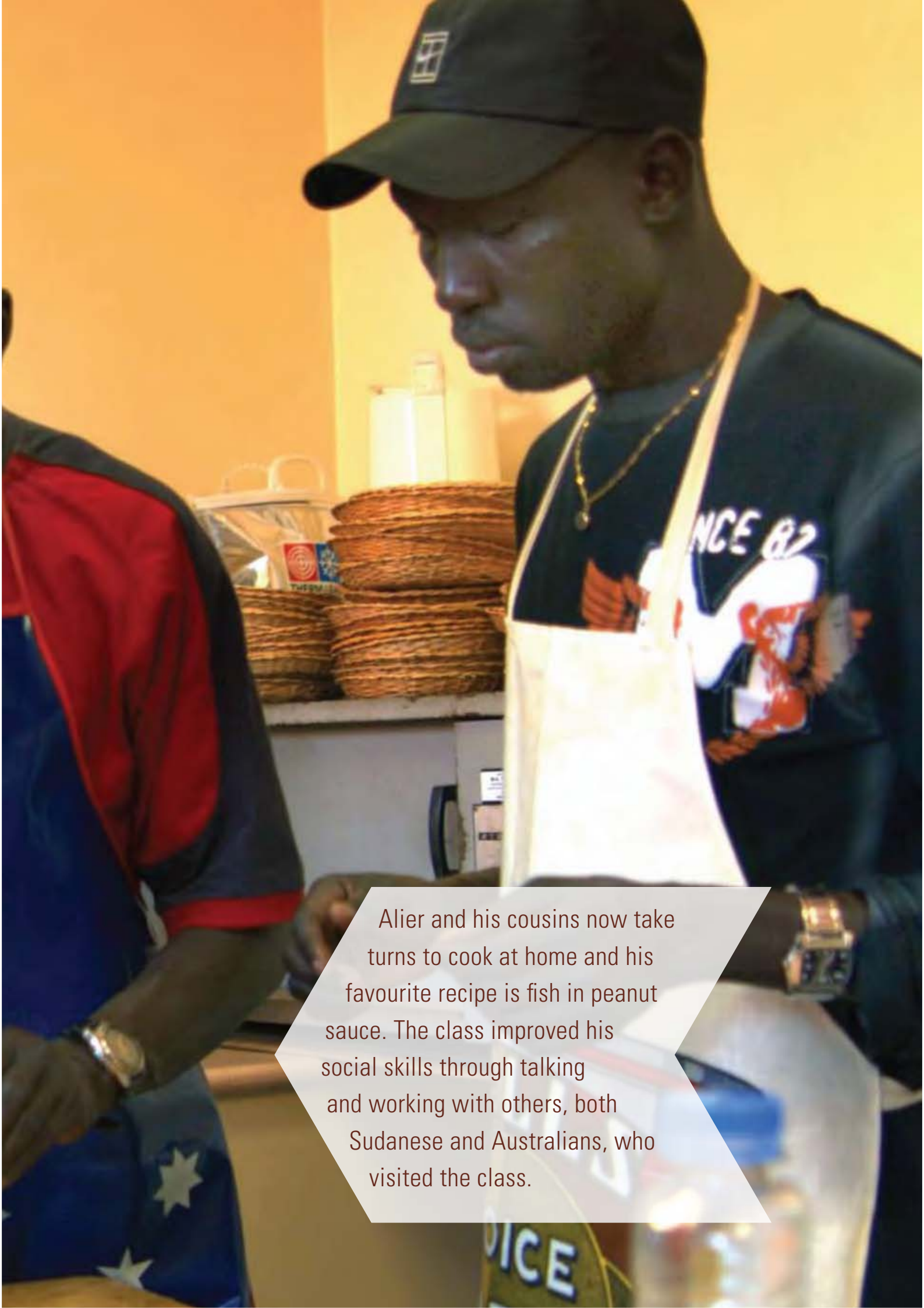
He arrived in South Australia from a refugee camp in Africa about five years ago. He is single, living with male cousins. Alier met the project coordinator, Ayen Kuol, soon after he arrived and was encouraged to attend the cooking class. Until then, he had difficulty in shopping, spending many hours looking for what he wanted. He survived on cereals and maize and did not include vegetables or meat in his diet. Alier said:

When I came to class it was perfect ... I just felt that it was the right class. It was pleasant and we had time to talk with the women. This was important because we were quite isolated and that was the right time to exchange cultural stories from back home about men and women and relationships.

Alier finds that learning to cook has saved him money. He and his cousins now take turns to cook at home and his favourite recipe is fish in peanut sauce.

The class improved his social skills through talking and working with others, both Sudanese and Australians, who visited the class.

photo > Alier, cooking with a friend



Alier and his cousins now take turns to cook at home and his favourite recipe is fish in peanut sauce. The class improved his social skills through talking and working with others, both Sudanese and Australians, who visited the class.

The project has created an awareness of the personal changes need for successful settlement. Guor said:

It saves money. If you cook what you've bought it's quite cheap, and we have very little money. If I spend the money on Hungry Jacks or McDonald's, it does not last.

The success of the original cooking group has generated useful discussion in the Sudanese community about gender roles and fears of losing 'culture' through resettlement.

STTARS has had several community consultations with other African communities with a view to making available similar resources and support should the need be identified.

A collection of Sudanese recipes has been published by STTARS in collaboration with the University of South Australia. Ayen Kuol, STTARS' Families and Communities Program Coordinator, initiated the recipe project.

In 2007, Vida Films with the assistance of the South Australian Film Corporation produced a film about the project titled *Ayen's Cooking School for African Men* which was broadcast on the Special Broadcasting Service. After the screening, male Sudanese community leaders in Melbourne contacted Ayen for advice on starting a similar program there.

DVDs of *Ayen's Cooking School for African Men* are available from Vida Films, telephone 08 8165 2473 or via the website at [www.vidafilms.com.au](http://www.vidafilms.com.au) where you can download a detailed study guide and learn more about Ayen and the boys in her class.

## Challenges

The Sudanese cultural attitude to males preparing food was an obstacle to men feeling comfortable about being engaged in the project. Traditionally, Sudanese men simply do not cook. The attitude that cooking was the realm of women was held not only by the male participants but also by the broader Sudanese community, particularly the older women. As a result, the project was initially slow to take off.

There needs to be greater recognition of the significance of the initiative, and a commitment to continue funding the project.

## Key factors in the project's success

The key to the success of this project was to continue to engage with, and listen to members of the communities and remain flexible and open to their direction and ideas for developing current and future projects. Community-driven activities provide a sense of ownership.

Community consultation in identifying, planning and implementing activities is very important. For example, the timing and location of group activities needs to meet the needs of participants.

Flexibility around attendance was one of the key elements of the project's success.

The initiative shows the value of projects developed by workers familiar with the background and fluent in the language of the target group. This results in more open and effective discussion in developing the project.

## Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

Agencies need to actively engage with local community members and be alert and responsive to their needs.

Activities should be designed and delivered in close collaboration with community members.

Persistence pays off, even when the initial response is slow.

Cooking activities should reflect the current realities of daily life in Australia, along with the need for retaining knowledge and skills in cooking traditional foods.

Foster relationships with communities by doing small things that are meaningful and relevant to the community.

Be available and responsive to the community and its ideas.

## Contact details

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