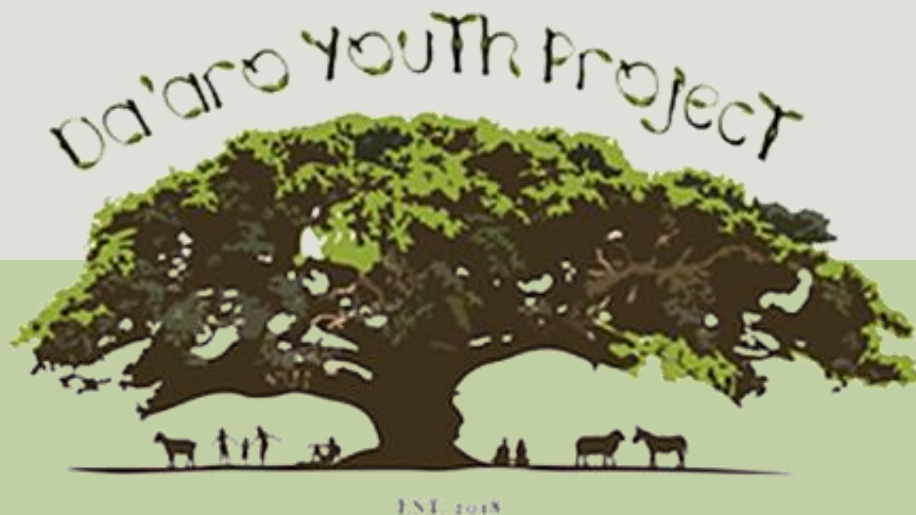


DA'ARO YOUTH PROJECT

2023-24



**Injera Club: commensality
impact on mental health**

Report by Sheymae Abdulkader

REPORT OUTLINE

This report is based upon six weeks of ethnographic fieldwork conducted at Da'aro Youth Project's (DYP) Tuesday Injera Club between August and September 2023. This research was carried out as part of an undergraduate dissertation examining the role of commensality in fostering belonging, identity and ethical self-formation among youth asylum seekers and volunteers. The findings presented here draw upon participant-observation, as well as interviews with DYP staff, volunteers, and youth members.

This report is instigated by Mind in order to highlight what DYP does and its impact. In doing so, this report outlines how DYP's Injera Club's use of commensality acts productively as a form of mental health support for its young people.

This report will provide an overview of what DYP is, highlighting its achievements over the past year and detailing how the organization operates to fulfill its mission. The second section of the report will feature key themes identified during my undergraduate research, illustrating how DYP provides a distinctive form of mental health support, despite not explicitly labelling it as such.

INTRODUCTION

Da'aro Youth Project (DYP) is a community-led organization supporting young refugees and asylum seekers from the Horn of Africa. The DYP was established to support unaccompanied young people who have arrived in the UK from the Horn of Africa, specifically, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia.

The charity draws inspiration from the Da'aro tree found dotted across the villages of Eritrea and Ethiopia. Under the lush foliage of these trees, villagers would gather to resolve issues, manage communal affairs, and educate. In the same spirit DYP fosters a sense of belonging among the diaspora and refugee groups its service-users come from.

DYP aims to promote the wellbeing of these young asylum seekers, many of whom have endured traumatic journeys through difficult and dangerous routes to arrive here, and often struggle to adjust to life in the UK without family support. They work to do this by providing direct support to these young people and advocating for changes to systems that discriminate against them. In doing so, DYP believes that they improve their mental health and social integration, as well as provide them with a better future.

IMPACT OVERVIEW

2023-24 achievements at a glance*

Over the last 18 months, DYP has made significant progress allowing for the expansion of services and aid for its youth members



268

Young People Reached



1920

Hot Meals Served



59

New Cases Opened

*Between April 2023 and March 2024



6

More staff, totaling 8 staff members

SERVICES

DYP achieves its mission of improving the mental health and social integration of its young people through four ways:



Campaigning – DYP campaigns on issues that impact unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. This is carried out through petitioning the government on various issues such as the alarming rate of suicide deaths amongst asylum seeking youth. In addition, it involves liaising with MPs to raise issues directly in Parliament, being a voice in the media and supporting the work of the Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium on mental health policy work.

Injera Club – DYP hosts a weekly youth club held in Streatham where the young people can relax, play games and socialise and enjoy homely food.



Thursday Youth Club– DYP has collaborated with South London Refugee Association (SLRA) to deliver a joint Thursday Youth Club. This club caters for unaccompanied refugees and asylum-seeking young people aged 14-25 and offers ESOL classes by the volunteers. This is also a space where the young people can participate in games, arts and crafts and enjoy a hot meal.

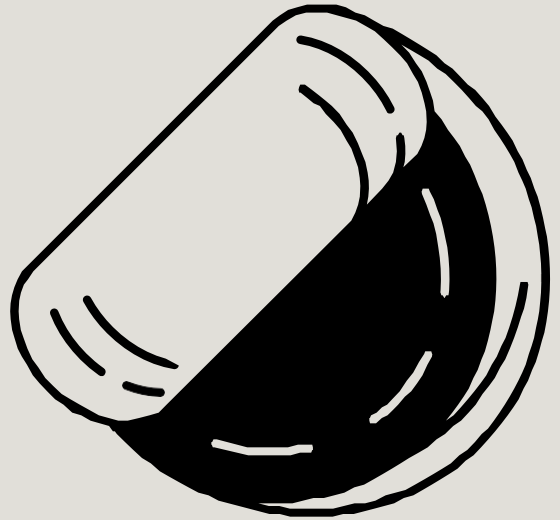
Casework Support - In-house caseworkers offer trauma-informed, intensive casework to identify the needs of young people, advocate for their interests within the care and asylum system, and connect young people with the services, opportunities and support they need to reach their goals



Activities - An engaging program of activities, trips and outings are provided throughout the year to create lasting memories, foster a sense of belonging and provide new opportunities. These include outings with an educational/cultural as well as recreational focus.

COMMENSALITY AT INJERA CLUB

Commensality refers to the practice of eating together. At Injera Club, this practice operates against the backdrop of a hostile anti-immigrant rhetoric. The food served is traditional Eritrean/Ethiopian cuisine, familiar to its Horn of Africa majority members.



Injera is a sour fermented flatbread made from teff flour and serves as a staple in Eritrean/Ethiopian cuisine. It is also the foundation for various dishes like *tsebhi*, *shiro* and *kowlo kapuchi* which are served at Injera Club.

Studies on ethnic supermarkets and foodways have long illuminated the seminal role of food for creating a sense of identity and belonging for migrants and asylum-seekers. This is no different at DYP's Injera Club. What is unique is the shared eating that is practiced. Anthropological studies on shared eating, commensality or conviviality have highlighted its generative potential. Carsten (2000) describes the practice of shared eating as akin to "shared substance" tied to kinship and invoking a sense of relatedness.

Sutton (2021) explores commensality as a form of resistance and appeal to the senses. He posits commensality as an “emergent process” through which conviviality is fomented, redressing the anomie of modern life. In his work on a social kitchen movement during the economic crisis in Greece, he explores the “politically liberatory and sensory aspects of eating together”. In doing so, he establishes the social kitchen movement as “a break, an imaginative space, or a sanctuary” against the backdrop of economic precarity in Greece.

The same liberatory impact of Injera Club is highlighted through the reflections of its members and staff at DYP.

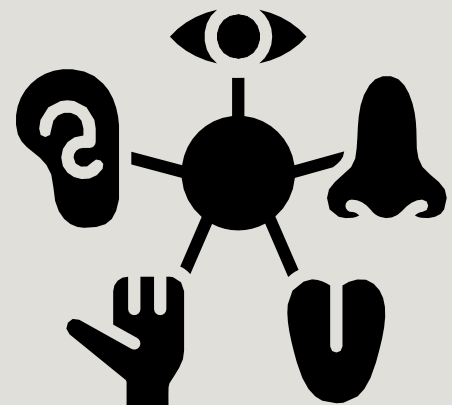
SENSORIAL SIGNIFICANCE

“The reason why we serve them traditional food is to give them that memory. This is also home. You’ve lost your home, but you have home here” - Sarah, Director of DYP

Sense of smell is an important aspect which draws the young members into the youth centre. This aids in their belonging and identity formation.

Posner and Sabar (2013) note how restaurants create a “pseudo-home environment that is experience through all senses”. This sensual experience demonstrates how immigrants create a sense of home. This is echoed by the young people in Injera Club.

Some of the young people identified the aroma of the himbasha, embaba as well the



sound of the mekeshkesh whilst the elder women at the center make boon. These scents and sounds were reminiscent of the memories of their mum and aunts back home, illuminating the pivotal role of smell in constructing a sense of stability for asylum-seekers in a foreign and often strange place.

These sensory aspects of food demonstrate how the environment at Injera Club creates “sensescape” through which memory-making and identity construction is made possible in the face of hostile anti-immigrant policies.

“... And we want Injera Club for when they walk in to bring them back to that, as if they’re walking home [...] And when it’s home, you’re at ease, you’re comfortable. And then you’ll be able to also tell us your problems”

MENTAL HEALTH WITHOUT NAMING IT

Refugees and asylum seekers are often described as being in “limbo”. This refers to the uncertainty and instability that displaced persons experience as they await status. Even upon receiving status in the UK, this prolonged liminal situation affects asylum seekers’ sense of self and identity. This is encapsulated in O’Reilly’s (2018) notion of “**ontological liminality**”. This is described as the internalized feeling of being caught between states, where this 'in-between existence' becomes a central part of one's identity and daily life. Ultimately, this lack of clarity impinges upon the ability to-be and the mental health of asylum-seeking youth.

This is reflected in many of the interviews and conversations undertaken with some of the young attendees at Injera Club.



***“I don’t know why,
but kebed iu (‘it’s
heavy’) there’s a lot
of chinket
(depression) here”
- Young person***

Many described their motivations for coming to the club as a form of **“escapism”**. One particular interlocutor explicitly described this in mental health terms (above). The same interlocutor detailed how they would travel all the way from Croydon after college to come to the centre every week because **“kem gezay iu”** (“it’s like my home”). Idioms of heaviness or wanting to escape highlight how ontological liminality profoundly impacts the mental health of asylum-seeking youth.

DYP’s recognition of this sense of liminality has underpinned Injera Club’s operations. Activities such as football, music sessions, daytrips, alongside the traditional meal, offer the young people alternative forms of healing, beyond biomedical therapy.

SafePlayHome
HappyEscape
EscapismFamily
Enjoyment

The offer of traditional food draws the youngsters into the centre where they can not only feel the warmth from a home-cooked meal but also by meeting others and engaging in different activities. In this way, they receive **“a mental health service in some ways, but without naming it that”** (Sarah). The stigma attached to (ill) mental health means not naming it as such allows the young people to receive the care they need, but either don’t know or don’t want to articulate.

“it doesn’t take away all their problems but it gives them a bit of release... and I think when I say to you, we are saving lives. I believe in that. I’m not exaggerating. I do believe, I do believe it.” - Sarah

Ontological liminality reveals a disconnect between social services’ care provisions, and the care young people actually need. Although material necessities may be offered, such as a form of housing or legal status, these spatial and temporal measures do not adequately respond to young people’s actual needs. It is only by attending to the ontological liminality, and by extension, the way in which the body responds to it, that we can understand how this sense of liminality affects young people’s sense of belonging and identity in their host country. DYP does this through Injera Club’s traditional food and extra-curricular activities.

This contrasts with social services who believe that providing for material needs is enough and that once access to basic things is in place, young people should be automatically happy and settled.

“this is what social services don’t understand. They say ‘but we’ve given you food, we’ve given you clothing, you didn’t have any, now we’ve given you education, given you a laptop, what are you sad about?’”

SUMMARY

At DYP advocacy is a theme that appears and runs throughout the workings of the charity and how the youth are cared for. As such, the staff and volunteers position themselves as **“advocate.”**



“We are advocates, not service-providers” - Sarah

The casework support from in-house caseworkers as well as campaigning highlights how third-sector organisations are increasingly filling the void left by statutory service-providers.

Reflective of its name, DYP acts as a source of shelter, knowledge, connection and community for the young people that walk through its doors. The element of shared communal eating is a distinctive feature of how DYP operates to address the needs of its young members.

As highlighted through this report, DYP’s Injera Club foments a form of mental health support without naming it as such.

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