

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Somalis in Oslo

## At Home in Europe Project

December 11 2013

This report examines the experience of Somalis living in Oslo, Norway, focusing on five areas of local policy and the broader themes of identity, belonging and interaction. Through focus group discussions with Norwegian-Somali residents and interviews and conversations with key stakeholders in the city, the Open Society Foundations has incorporated diverse perspectives and provides recommendations for improving integration to the benefit of all.

Norway has only recently become a country hosting any substantial number of immigrants; the past decade has seen a surge in annual immigration, with numbers almost doubling between 2005 and 2011. People of Somali origin make up a fairly small percentage of the overall immigrant population, but are among the largest refugee groups. Somali immigrants in Norway are young: 80 percent are under 40, and 80 percent of the second generation, children born in Norway to Somali immigrant parents, is under the age of 10. Somali communities are concentrated in the urban areas of Norway, especially Oslo, where they are the third-largest immigrant group in the city. Oslo has developed a robust policy framework for managing inclusion, and scores high on the Intercultural Cities Index; a joint initiative by the Council of Europe and the European Union to utilize the potentials of a diverse citizenship. City policies include the OXLO (Oslo Extra Large) initiative, which is a framework for enhancing inclusion.

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## Identity and belonging

Migration is still a new phenomenon in Norway, and a cross-cultural identity is still developing. According to one observer, equality is conceived as sameness in the Norwegian context, equating national identity with ethnic origin. Younger Norwegian-Somalis report not being accepted as Norwegian, and some struggle with not feeling a sense of belonging to Norway while not feeling fully Somali either. Feelings of being excluded and facing stereotypes on a daily basis are expressed by young and old alike, and affect all areas of local policy discussed in the report.

## Education

The large number of children among Norwegian-Somalis gives education special significance in their perspectives on integration. Participation rates in school are lower for Norwegian-Somalis than for the population as a whole as well as for all immigrant groups, with drop-out rates well above average as well. This may in part be due to education trajectories disrupted by war and displacement and the range of challenges facing Somali families in Norway, as well as the fact that the Norwegian educational system has not adjusted quickly enough to increasing diversity in Oslo schools. Language and cultural barriers make it difficult for Norwegian-Somali parents to engage with the school system, and to assist children with their studies. The Open Society Foundations focus group participants expressed concern about the uneven distribution of students with an immigrant background in Oslo's schools, and the insufficient resources that certain schools have to follow up students with extra needs. A range of initiatives exist to improve the situation, such as the City of Oslo's focus on lifting conditions—including those in kindergartens and schools—in deprived city districts like Groruddal; the Child Welfare Services' Drop-out Team (barnevern Drop Out Teamet) in Søndre Nordstrand district that provides guidance and support for those dropping out or at the risk of dropping out of secondary school; and the Somali Students Association's (Somalisk Studentforening, SSF) initiative to provide homework support and organise motivational seminars for those in secondary schools.

## Employment

Norwegian-Somalis struggle in the labour market, with a range of studies finding low levels of employment, for instance in Oslo where by 1 January 2013, only 40 percent of men and 23.1 percent of women aged 30–59 were employed. Women's participation in the labour force is particularly low, possibly due in part to the fact that many are single mothers with responsibility for many children and because of expectations that women do not seek work outside the home. The overall poor labour market situation of Norwegian-Somalis can partly be explained by the fact that Somalis have arrived recently in Norway, and the lack of formal qualifications of the majority of them is problematic in a country that lacks options for unskilled labourers.

The lengthy process towards finding work is a real barrier to inclusion. In particular the first phase in Norwegian asylum centres—which has been described as the waiting phase—is crucial in this respect. Moreover, many Norwegian-Somalis find the programmes to help them find employment are of limited use. Focus group participants attributed the difficulties securing work to a range of factors, including both structural factors such as discrimination and exclusion, and personal ones such as insufficient language skills or a lack of formal qualifications. Initiatives to address the situation include the Job Opportunity (Jobbsjansen)

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project; the Link Workers (Linkarbeidere) project; and initiatives to provide support for entrepreneurs.

## Housing

In a country where the majority of people are homeowners, only 16 percent of Norwegian-Somalis own their own home. While there is state and local support to help those with limited funds to secure housing, navigating the social housing system is difficult and the standards of the housing are often a concern. Discrimination in the private housing market has been documented, despite legislation forbidding discriminatory treatment; moreover, private renters face considerable insecurity as they can be thrown out at any time and often have to move frequently. A challenge that prevents Norwegian-Somalis from buying, besides their lack of purchasing power, is that they avoid taking out a mortgage because there are none available that complies with Islamic lending rules. Housing is a central element of inclusion, which is especially strongly felt by homeless people. The Church's City Mission (Kirkens Bymisjon) runs a housing project in Grønland for East Africans (mainly Somalis) with severe psychological problems.

## Health and social protection

Data on migrants' health are scarce, which makes it difficult to develop appropriate measures. The 2013 strategy on migrant health of the Ministry of Health and Care Services suggests further measures to address this lack of knowledge, building on the established the Norwegian Centre for Minority Health Research (Nasjonale Kompetanseenhet for Minoritetshelse, NAKMI). Its main goal is to reduce social health differences and guarantee equal health and care services. The main challenges of reaching this aim are information and communication: how people understand health, signs of illness and measures for improving health often varies greatly across cultures; and on top, quality interpretation is often not provided in the health services.

The aspect of the social protection framework that is of most concern to the Open Society Foundations respondents is the child welfare services. Stories circulate about the service improperly interfering in family affairs among recent Somali immigrants, exacerbated by a heavy reliance on personal contacts as information source. At the same time, professionals working with the service may have insufficient background knowledge about the functioning of Somali families and may have incorrect assumptions about social and cultural practices. Communication, both in terms of language and intercultural understanding, is a major problem, according to focus group participants. An Oslo mosque has initiated a programme to help engage the authorities and Somali families in the child welfare services, and both civil society and the private sector have also developed measures in this area.

## Policing and security

Oslo is overall regarded as a safe city, but needs to continue the holistic work it is engaged in to prevent an increase of crime and segregation in the city. Research indicates that police "stop and search" actions rely on racial profiling and give rise to tensions between ethnic minorities and the police force. Youth gang activity, which is currently rare but is an issue of future concern, does often have an ethnic or racial component, and a number of programmes have been developed to address youth criminality in Oslo. SaLTo, for example, is an

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innovative initiative by the Oslo municipality and police district to engage in crime prevention work among children and young people.

## Participation and citizenship

Both Norwegian and Somali cultures highly value a sense of civic participation and community; and Somalis are very involved in civic and political participation while their levels of Norwegian citizenship attainment are also high. Locally, most focus group participants acknowledged that many Norwegian-Somalis do not engage deeply with their neighbourhoods, schools and other community outlets. This was attributed to language difficulties and insufficient information and knowledge. At the same time, there is a wide range of Somali organisations engaged in integration support. Strategic cooperation between these organisations is, however, often lacking.

Norwegian-Somalis have a good voting rate compared with other immigrant groups, and three Norwegian-Somali candidates have been elected City Council representatives. These elected representatives face high expectations from Somali voters, although they are often seen as minority politicians only who are having to become adept in the art of political lobbying and coalition building. Another important aspect of Norwegian-Somali civic and political participation relates to the fact that the Norwegian-Somali community, as part of a larger Somali diaspora, maintains strong and active ties with Somalia and Somali affairs. These transnational ties have been acknowledged by the Norwegian government as a strategic political resource.

## Media

Immigration is a topic much covered in the media, but little attention is given to the everyday lives of immigrants. Analyses of media coverage have shown that Somalis are among the immigrant groups mentioned most often, on topics such as unemployment, poor school performance, khat abuse, female genital mutilation (FGM) and other issues with negative associations. Open Society Foundations focus group participants reflected on this negative image, and felt that it affected their everyday lives in Oslo to a great extent, affecting the perceptions of teachers, employers, landlords and policymakers. An increasing number of Norwegian-Somalis are working in the media and several media outlets have made efforts to expand coverage of an increasingly diverse Norway. Norwegian-Somali media are simultaneously involved in providing information to Norwegian-Somalis and stimulating debate about a range of topics. A number of them can play a corrective role to the fact that Norwegian-Somali friends, family and neighbours often are an important but not necessarily always reliable source of information in the Norwegian-Somali community.

## Recommendations

1. The City of Oslo and other stakeholders should strengthen their engagement with Somali and other immigrant communities and faith organisations as well as community members by involving those with relevant experience and expertise and networks as active partners in promoting integration. Engagement should be at a level that brings them on board as active and equal citizens and residents of Oslo.

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2. Norwegian-Somalis are a vibrant, dynamic and engaged community across various sectors and issues. In order to ensure that this level of engagement is fully utilised and captured there is a need for this community to increase its capacity and skills, at the individual, civil society and small scale organisational level. A more qualified and professional set of Somali organisations can only be an asset to the city of Oslo.
  3. Labour participation amongst Norwegian-Somalis is low. The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and civil society organisations should work to develop support and guidance for civil servants and policy makers on addressing the particular challenges faced by immigrant job seekers. These include language needs, foreign qualifications, work experience outside Norway and unfamiliarity with recruitment and employment practices in Norway. This initiative would also assist immigrant civil society organisations to develop information and guidance on what to expect from government services and how to get the maximum benefit from those services.

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## CONTACT INFO

To obtain more information about these findings and the At Home in Europe Project, contact:

Klaus Dik Nielsen, Advocacy Officer, At Home in Europe Project

Open Society Initiative for Europe

Work: +44 (0) 207 031 1714

Mobile: +44 (0) 791 769 5286

[klausdik.nielsen@opensocietyfoundations.org](mailto:klausdik.nielsen@opensocietyfoundations.org)

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