

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Somalis in Helsinki

At Home in Europe Project

November 21 2013

Somalis in Helsinki is part of a seven city research series, Somalis in European Cities, by the At Home in Europe project of the Open Society Foundations which examines the realities of people from Somali backgrounds in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Malmo, Leicester, London, and Oslo. In Helsinki, the research was conducted by the Department of Social Research, University of Helsinki.

This report highlights the experiences of Somalis living in Helsinki, focusing on five areas of local policy and the broader themes of identity, belonging and interaction. Through qualitative research methods, including interviews with key stakeholders at the city and national level and focus group discussions with Somali residents, conducted from the beginning of December 2012 through to the end of February 2013, this Open Society Foundations report incorporates diverse perspectives and provides recommendations for improving social inclusion and cohesion in this diversified Nordic city.

Although their absolute numbers have always been small, the arrival of Somali asylum seekers in the early 1990s was a significant event; it has been referred to as the “Somali shock”, Finland’s first experience accepting large groups of refugees.

Population

Finland's population is relatively homogenous, with just under five per cent of inhabitants identified as having foreign origins. Immigrants are overwhelmingly centred in the capital, Helsinki, and its surrounding suburbs. People with Somali origins are the third-largest group of foreign origin in Finland, a total of 14,672 at the end of 2012.

Policy context

Responsibilities for the integration of migrants in Finland are split between national level authorities and municipalities. The city of Helsinki and its immigration division has developed city policies focusing on integration and cohesion, housing, employment and education.

Identity and belonging

Among the Open Society Foundations' focus group participants, there was a clear consensus that there are strong negative attitudes about Somalis in Finland. This contributes to a persistent sense of difference and even exclusion from the wider society. At home in Helsinki, the participants noted, the high number of other Somalis helps build a sense of belonging and community. They described a range of interactions with Finns, usually respectful but restrained including a few successful community development initiatives which have helped to build up more sustained and meaningful contact between groups.

Discrimination and harassment

In findings from EU-MIDIS in 2009, the Fundamental Rights Agency's European Minorities and Discrimination Survey, Somalis in Finland were among the immigrant and ethnic-minority groups that had most experienced discrimination; a national study, amongst others, found Somalis in Finland reported harassment and discrimination on the street, in shops, from the police and elsewhere. These experiences increase the sense of isolation and insecurity, according to focus group participants.

Education

Diversity in schools is increasing; Somalis are among the largest immigrant groups, particularly in pre-schools and comprehensive schools. However, the numbers drop off sharply in later years, with very few Somali-speakers represented in higher education. While studies are limited, data suggest that Somali children's achievement lags behind that of other immigrant groups. This issue was reflected in the focus group discussions, where language was of particular concern: children of Somali-speaking parents may be placed in courses in Finnish as a second language, regardless of their abilities. Some participants felt that this can limit their educational opportunities. Focus group participants also reported racism and discrimination in schools.

Employment

Difficulties in the employment sector were one of the most significant concerns among the focus group participants. There was wide agreement that discrimination affects Somalis trying to find work in Finland, a finding supported by independent studies. Women face particular problems, and the training programmes that are available to them have not been especially effective. Failure to find employment was cited as a major obstacle to feeling integrated with

Finnish society; while not having sufficient command of the language is a barrier to employment, having the requisite language skills is not sufficient to ensure appropriate work.

Housing

The tradition of mixed housing policies in Helsinki has produced good results regarding low segregation of migrant populations. However, as the Helsinki area becomes more diverse, segregation between neighbourhoods has also been on the rise. Strategies to maintain mixed housing have only been moderately successful, and with the experience of racist harassment or intimidation, many immigrants feel safer in areas where they form a larger group. Focus group participants reported a range of views on their housing situation, some feeling satisfied with the sense of community, quality of housing and availability of services, while others expressed concern about racist crime and isolation.

Health and social protection

Studies have found that, despite general reports of poor health indicators among Somali communities in Finland, Somalis are satisfied with their quality of life. The differences between the Finnish and Somali approaches to treatment were a source of concern for some focus group participants, as well as communication problems with medical staff, but overall the focus group participants regarded the quality of health care to be good. The use of mental health services among Somali immigrants is still quite low, despite the high proportion of traumatic experiences in this community.

Policing and security

Among participants in the focus group discussions, opinions were divided about overall security in the Helsinki area. While some praised the safe and well-policed atmosphere in their neighbourhoods, others cited racial profiling as a problem, and women especially noted a problem with harassment on the streets. Studies show that Somalis rarely report crimes to the authorities, and several focus group discussions touched upon situations where the police did not address assault cases in an appropriate way.

Participation and citizenship

About 40 per cent of Somalis in Finland have acquired citizenship; as one focus group participant noted, “Having citizenship doesn’t often change anything; it’s the origin they look at” as far as the sense of integration in society. Efforts to draw immigrants into civic participation include tenant councils and Somali organisations. The success of these initiatives depends very much on the extent to which the Somali communities participate, according to the focus group discussion. There are a large number of Somali associations in Finland, many of which would benefit from capacity-building support and efforts to unite around common causes. Somali candidates have participated in local elections, and in November 2012, a Somali woman and long-time Helsinki city councillor was re-elected to the Helsinki municipality.

Role of the media

Media coverage of immigrant communities remains limited, and studies raise concerns that the representations of Somalis in the media tend to reproduce stereotypes and inhibit

integration. Research has noted a focus on negative themes such as crime and conflict and a lack of immigrant voices in the mainstream press.

Recommendations

As one of the first and largest immigrant groups to arrive in Finland, Somalis have faced a number of challenges to integration. While the state and local governments have developed multifaceted policies to help migrants find their way in Finnish society, there are still obstacles, particularly in finding jobs and in the education sector. In addition, racial discrimination and harassment were considered major impediments to the integration process. Among the focus group participants, perceptions of daily life in Helsinki were quite varied, with some praising the quiet, secure environment and others struggling with isolation and unemployment. A small number of pilot initiatives to improve integration are on-going, and could be expanded to engage a greater number of participants. The civil society sector, although active, remains highly fragmented; a more unified approach could also help address some of the issues that affect Somali communities more generally. Differences in experiences as regards gender and generation were evident, but should also be studied further. Attention should, in particular, be given to the second generation of Finnish Somalis and ensure that they can feel they belong to the City of Helsinki and that they have the same opportunities to succeed as any other resident or Finnish citizen has.

1. The Finnish government, Helsinki city council and state provider agencies should raise awareness on the issue of belonging, the changing ethnic landscape of Finnish society and the multiplicity of identities that are emerging. For example, the City of Helsinki could convene a working group of public and private companies who design and produce publications, websites, advertising and other visual materials for the municipal government and other public bodies. The group should review current materials and agree guidelines and methods on how these can better represent the diverse population of Helsinki and promote positive images of its minority communities.
2. The role of education and educational institutions is vital in offering opportunities to all in order to function as equal members of society and is a pre-condition for stability and social cohesion. Limited data suggests that Somalis are underachieving, especially in higher education. The Ministry of Education, the National Board of Education and the City of Helsinki should study the contextual and possible systemic causes and devise tailored solutions for all groups, where youngsters are under-represented in secondary education, such as Somalis, to reach post-secondary education and gain professional training or solid academic skills that enable them to continue in higher education such as universities. Educational guidance and counseling for students and other family members should come far before the 9th grade.

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3. The Finnish government should give the situation of migrant groups that are facing specific challenges in the labour market, such as Somalis, specific attention in its planning and implementation strategies. Currently the Occupational Safety and Health Divisions of the Regional State Administrative Agency monitor compliance with the Non-Discrimination Act in employment issues. The task should be opened to another entity that could devise closer cooperation with immigrant communities, particularly with communities that face high rates of discrimination in the labour market, such as Somalis.

CONTACT INFO

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