

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Somalis in Copenhagen

At Home in Europe Project

November 4, 2014

The report Somalis in Copenhagen is part of a comparative policy-oriented study focusing on cities in Europe with a significant Somali population. It deals with the experience of Danish-Somalis living in Copenhagen. The other cities covered in this project are Amsterdam, Helsinki, Leicester, London, Malmö and Oslo.

The research aims to identify the challenges and successes in ensuring the integration of Somalis living in Copenhagen and to understand their everyday experiences and the relationships between Copenhageners with Danish-Somali background and important welfare and societal institutions.

Immigration from Somalia to Denmark is quite a new phenomenon and is very much linked to the political situation in Somalia. Before 1989, only a couple of hundred Somali immigrants lived in Denmark, but by 2001 more than 16,000 people with a Somali background lived in Denmark. As of 1 July 2014, 19,163 persons were defined as being of Somali origin in Denmark. ¹

As a new group of immigrants, Danish-Somalis have had to face the challenges of the repercussions of civil war, refugee status, split families, resettlement and significant stigmatisation and stereotyping in the ethnic hierarchy in Denmark. Discussions in all focus groups (78 people) and among the majority of stakeholders (38 people) interviewed (both ethnic-majority and -minority) emphasised the role of the media as crucial for the inclusion and identity of Danish-Somalis, and there is a general understanding and perception of the media as dominated by negative stereotypes of Danish-Somalis and Somalis elsewhere.

¹ Danmarks Statistik, Statistikbanken: FOLK1: Folketal den 1. Juli 2014 (Population 1. July 2014), at www.statistikbanken.dk (Accessed 21 September 2014) Being of a country-specific origin is defined according to either self categorisation (when parents are unknown), or for immigrants equivalent to country of birth, or for descendants equivalent to citizenship, or if only one Danish parent is known then as Denmark or if both parents are known equivalent to country of birth/citizenship of the mother, Danmarks statistik – concepts: <http://www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/dokumentation/hvadbetyder.aspx> (accessed 3 October 2014).
Open Society Foundation, Millbank Tower, London SW1P 4QP, United Kingdom | TEL +44-(0)207-031-0200 | FAX +44-(0)207-031-0200

The Danish-Somali population in Copenhagen is small (4,500 people) but along a number of demographic and socio-economic parameters, the average Danish-Somalis differ from the average population in Copenhagen, for example it is a younger population, the vast majority living in rented accommodation and having below-average incomes; there are more single-parent families, more children in families, lower rates of employment and a higher unemployment rates. Whatever the reasons may be for this, the social and economically disadvantaged situation for Danish-Somali Copenhageners is quite challenging for living and organising everyday life.

The Danish-Somalis who participated in the study in focus groups or in individual interviews represented a broad diversity within the Danish-Somali group, which should always be emphasised in studies like this that frame a specific ethnicity as focus. The interviews reflected many different perceptions and opinions on intergenerational relations, religion, tradition, politics in Somalia, gender, clan, politics in Denmark and so on. This study is not about “how are the Danish-Somalis in Copenhagen”, but about everyday experiences and relationships between Copenhageners with Danish-Somali background and important welfare and societal institutions.

General tendencies

One of the most consistent findings in the interviews was the very high level of discrimination and stereotyping experienced among people with a Danish-Somali background. The perception was also reflected among the majority of interviewees with other ethnic-minority backgrounds as well as ethnic-majority backgrounds. Two kinds of assessments of discrimination and stereotyping were typical across ethnicities:

discrimination perceived as wrong but more or less almost a given and very difficult to do anything about

the continuously negative media and political representation of Danish-Somalis is the root cause for powerful discrimination and stereotyping

Discrimination was experienced in many contexts: the educational system, the media and labour market were mentioned most often, but also was felt in the social housing neighbourhoods and the city administration, especially among young men by the police and connected with nightlife. Most of the non-Danish-Somali stakeholders interviewed recognised the experience of discrimination among the Danish-Somalis.

Although anti-discrimination measures are highly profiled in the city’s inclusion policy, it appears necessary to address exclusion more directly, in addition to changing attitudes and social relations between individuals. The discrimination experienced among Danish-Somalis indicates the presence of a kind of institutionalised discrimination and lack of effective prevention and sanctions.

Some of the focus areas for this study revealed experiences of considerable gaps between some institutions within and outside the city, but also good practices especially at the local level. This study shows urgent needs for information and knowledge about rights and obligations, assistance in addressing the system, advisers, guidance, support in complaints and links to networks that can offer assistance.

City services

Several corps of bridge-builders, who are mediators or facilitators between the service providers and minority groups, have been established outside and inside the municipality. There are health communicators, integration advisers, dialogue consultants, discrimination consultants, discrimination advisers, neighbourhood mothers and Somali bridge builders who are all facilitating access to and knowledge of the system, as well as informing ethnic-majority professionals about the specific problems of ethnic minorities.

Interviews revealed general satisfaction with the different bridge builder corps as a very important link between the Danish-Somali residents and the system, be it a school, a job centre, a case worker in the social administration department, a housing association or another administrative office. Many of these bridge builder corps are defined as projects with limited time frames and insecure economic futures, however; where workers are paid by the hour the situation is especially tenuous. Instability or high turnover among the workers in these services can undermine the long-term use of the knowledge and working methods when projects are of short duration.

Organisational Divides and Confusion

The borderlines between different city administrations seemed to be a source of concern about cooperation, overlap and the conflict of interests within the municipality. These organisational problems are felt by many of the users of the city services to be a source of confusion and impotence, enforcing the gap between the system and the citizen.

Education

The level of experienced discrimination in the educational system was very high, and even though experiences may relate to schools in other municipalities it emphasises a need to deal more explicitly with discrimination in the classroom.

In the interviews the personal relations with teachers first and moderators and facilitators second were extremely important for both pupils and parents. The integration advisers seemed all the way round to work successfully, and the voluntary Somali bridge builders as well as the Youth and Education (ungdom & uddannelse, U&U) supervisors² seem also to be important actors in the relationship between school, parents and pupils. It was seen as important to support the whole family instead of just seeing the individual child or parent, especially in single-parent families with many children.

Language is a prime area, both in regard to appreciating minority linguistic skills and using minority languages as communications tools, and it seems to be good practice that bilingual teachers use their linguistic skills to improve communication with the parents.

Employment

The overall national employment strategy and organisation of workfare and the focus on activation was characterised in the focus group as “the Ferris Wheel in Tivoli”, referring to the feeling of being forced into a closed circuit with no real prospective employment..

² Every young person in Copenhagen City between 13 and 15 is attached to a Youth and Education U&U supervisor from the Youth and Education Administration, who guide and support the young person especially when it comes to secondary education, educational choices and employment.

Users of the job centre among those interviewed described a situation of being individually trapped by poverty and control mechanisms; at the same time they characterised the way the system was working at a collective, social level as irrational, unproductive, a waste of money and disorderly. Nevertheless, they did rely on the system to help them find a job.

Several key civil society informants referred to the huge workload among volunteers helping and guiding Danish-Somali Copenhageners who need social benefits and assistance; and not only from the employment and integration administration, but in general in the municipality and the immigration service, housing companies and other agencies. Those interviewed stressed the urgent need for a guidance service adjusted to the need of Danish-Somali citizens enrolled at the job centre and a targeted effort to increase the knowledge in the group about rules, rights and the way the system works.

Housing

Many of those interviewed were very critical and offended by the government officially terming their social housing neighbourhood a “ghetto”, and perceived it as an insult and yet another mechanism of exclusion. One of the criteria of what makes a ghetto is still its ethnic composition, that is, with many residents having an ethnic-minority background, and this was regarded as extremely provocative and preventing good images and stories from the neighbourhood from reaching mainstream society.

More than 80 percent of the Danish-Somali population in Copenhagen lives in social housing with a locally elected structure that does not seem to work well in including the Danish-Somali residents. Social workers in housing areas also reported Danish-Somalis being at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy in the neighbourhood and that the Danish-Somalis were perceived as isolated and preferring to be only with other Danish-Somalis.

Policing and security

Experiences and assessment of the police as an institution were very mixed, but there seemed to a clear distinction not only between the local and central police, but also between the central police and the Police Intelligence Service (Politiets EfterretningsTjeneste, PET).

Despite the occasionally heated public atmosphere over terrorist threats and violent religious radicalisation, many Danish-Somalis interviewed praised the PET for taking a sensible, rational and practical approach to terror prevention, which involved recognition and dialogue with different actors in the local religious community and civil society in mutual efforts to prevent incidents.

The local police were also described by residents, social workers, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and others as generally good and reliable partners in neighbourhood cooperation and networking. The local police also have a big role in building trust in the local community in the police institution.

However both in focus groups and among stakeholders the difference between the local and the central police was highlighted, pointing out problematic and conflict-escalating attitudes, with the central police cited as those who do not know and are not known in the neighbourhood.

There seemed to be a huge challenge concerned with the legal system, with difficulties getting information on rights and obligations, on how to report a case, on where to complain, on how to get legal assistance, etc. In the interviews the system as such was assessed to work well and non-discriminating. Problems were formulated in terms of access, information and knowledge, and networks to people and NGOs who can assist.

Health and social protection

Stakeholders interviewed on the health situations of the Danish-Somalis estimated that health problems in this group were more significant than recognised; and more research on the health situation would be valuable in order to better target information and services from the city, given that health profiles produced by the municipality are only categorised as ethnic minority or majority, or Western or non-Western.

Different barriers and concerns were mentioned in the focus groups, such as the problems with written information. The language barrier had a huge impact on the Danish-Somalis' relationship with the system. The lack of knowledge of and access to the appropriate services was another obstacle.

The fear of having the children taken away by the authorities hangs over many families, according to interviews, a fear that can prevent families from contacting the authorities in case of problems.

Mental problems and diseases were specific areas of concern and according to the focus group discussions, there are many Danish-Somalis with mental illness who are not given the proper treatment and care by the authorities. The fear of being stigmatised and socially excluded among the Danish-Somalis is parallel to the general experience of mental illness as a stigma, even though it may be spoken about in different terms.

Many in the focus groups agreed that the relationship between changing gender roles and the struggles of many Danish-Somali men in Denmark is linked to the widespread phenomenon of khat and alcohol abuse and homelessness. Many Danish-Somalis mentioned that older men in general are a specific vulnerable group and a group without much attention from the social system. At the same time, increasing homelessness among younger people was mentioned as a concern as well as unaccompanied asylum seekers, who may be at risk of living very vulnerable and lonely lives.

Citizenship and participation

There was general consensus among those interviewed that better voting and information on the opportunities to be active citizens in civil society rather than the electoral process is needed. Some felt excluded by the political and bureaucratic system as there are no voices to represent them.

Several of the Danish-Somalis interviewed wanted a platform from which it would be possible to address the political discourse in the municipality and criticised the closing of the Integration Council that had been one such mechanism.

Overall recommendations:

- The City of Copenhagen should use the achievements of its Inclusion Strategy for 2011–2014 to ensure that future policies and strategies build on and sustain progress to date, identify effective measures to address challenges that are still to be fully met, and adopt clear integration indicators that together with effective monitoring and evaluation can be used to track progress and assess the effectiveness of specific measures to achieve integration objectives.
- The City of Copenhagen should convene a task group of Danish-Somali civil society organisations to draw on current programmes such as the neighbourhood mothers, health communicators and other bridge-builders to develop an action plan for further improving the information and advice available to Danish-Somalis on employment and social legislation, health, housing, challenging discrimination, policing, education and opportunities for civic engagement.
- The City of Copenhagen should encourage the Danish government to consider the impact of the asylum system on the ability of Somali refugees to settle successfully in Denmark and the extent to which the asylum system may increase the risk of long-term exclusion due to its possible influence on health and other factors.
- The City of Copenhagen should consider how to address the need for raising awareness of ethnic discrimination and intercultural knowledge and competence among ethnic-majority citizens and professionals. The need could be met by campaigns, projects and training in educational institutions and in in-service training.
- The City of Copenhagen should consider how to use best practices and experiences from other cities and suggestions and opportunities from the Somali diaspora.

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 ; Open Society Initiative for Europe

Work: +44 (0) 207 031 1714

Mobile: +44 (0) 791 769 5286

Email: klausdik.nielsen@opensocietyfoundations.org

OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

THE OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS WORK TO BUILD VIBRANT AND TOLERANT DEMOCRACIES WHOSE GOVERNMENTS ARE ACCOUNTABLE TO THEIR CITIZENS. WORKING WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN MORE THAN 70 COUNTRIES, THE OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS SUPPORT JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION.

