

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Somalis in Amsterdam

## At Home in Europe Project

April 2, 2014

Somalis in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, is part of a research series produced by the Open Society Foundations' At Home in Europe Project that aims to generate original comparative data on the views, experiences and concerns of Somalis and on the ways in which authorities address these challenges in seven European cities: Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Leicester, London, Malmö and Oslo.

The study discusses eight overarching themes and largely builds upon primary sources: Somali focus group discussions and interviews with stakeholders (public sector officials, community leaders, members of civil society organisations), all undertaken for this report to reveal a more nuanced perspective on an important population.

### Population

Somalis in Amsterdam form a small group that is still finding its way between two cultures. Larger numbers of Somalis first began arriving in the Netherlands in the 1990s, with a second wave of immigration in 2007. Most of those arriving apply for asylum, with the remainder coming as part of the family reunification process. Currently (on the first of January 2013), 33,750 Somalis are officially registered in the country, but the number fluctuates, largely due to continued onward migration to the United Kingdom and elsewhere. In Amsterdam, Somalis live across the city, with higher concentrations in Nieuw West, West, Zuid Oost and Noord.

### Policy context

Current national immigration policies tend towards assimilation, after decades of policies that had a more multicultural or integration-based approach. Policies are also more generic, rather than targeting specific minority groups. The civic integration programme that focuses on language and employment skills receives high marks in surveys, but was less well received

among the Open Society Foundations focus groups because of the huge gap between what is known and what is expected (high levels of illiteracy and a strong oral tradition as against a writing one). A new law on integration puts more emphasis on individual choice responsibility and requires migrants to pay for their own integration; the impact of these changes is still emerging. For refugees it has been negotiated that they can get a loan to pay for their civic integration course and that this debt can be canceled in case they pass the exam.

## Identity and belonging

Generally, focus group participants had a stronger Muslim and Somali identity than what they experienced as residents of Amsterdam. It was also remarkable how transnational their lives were, with family and friends living all over the world. Anti-Muslim rhetoric in Dutch society may have contributed to a heightened sense of religious identity, which was pointed out as something relatively new. Social networks varied among the participants, with some interacting with people of many different backgrounds, and others mainly with other Somalis. Initiatives to support young people have provided coaching for Somali young people to help develop their identity and potential, with support from Somali organisations.

## Education

Somalis have some of the lowest education levels among refugee groups, with nearly 30 percent of Somali women in particular having no education at all. Almost one-third of Somalis between the ages of 15 and 64 participate in higher education; while the largest number takes part in vocational programmes, some are enrolled at university. The assessment test that determines a student's secondary school route requires excellent Dutch fluency, which may be a factor in Somali students' advancement. School dropouts remain high among Somalis, but the number has declined considerably in the past 10 years.

## Employment and income

With just under 30 percent of Somalis reporting a paid job in the Netherlands, labour market participation is low. Most of those with a job work at less skilled levels. Women face specific problems of labour market access: their education is worse, they are less likely to be proficient in Dutch, and where they are the head of the household, they may be without child-care options, since own contributions for formal child-care arrangements are considerable. Some focus group participants reported experiencing discrimination in the labour market, although more generally as immigrants or Muslims, not specifically due to being identified as Somali. A lack of financial planning and, consequently, debt has been noted as problems for Somali households. Many of the households support their relatives in Somalis, which is a burden on the household budget. A number of Amsterdam-based initiatives focusing on helping refugees find work have been undertaken, both in the public and civil society sectors. Support for women's employment has been a particular focus.

## Housing

As asylum seekers, most Somalis remain in refugee centres for the first period after arriving in the Netherlands; thereafter, they are dispersed among the various municipalities, which are required to provide housing. In Amsterdam, there are long waiting lists for social housing, and

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the supply for large families is limited. Some focus group participants expressed concerns over the process of getting settled in so large a city, with fairly limited support from state agencies.

## Health and social protection

Somalis report better health than several other large refugee groups, but this may be distorted by the underreporting of mental health problems. Somalis also do not use the health services much; focus group participants praised the health care available in the Netherlands, even though previous research has suggested that refugees are not getting the care they need in a timely way. Participants mentioned that language and cultural barriers create misunderstandings between Somalis and health-care providers, and the number of interpreters and Somali-speaking medical staff remains low. In the current climate of economic recession the number of interpreters has also dropped which makes communication more complicated.

A subject of particular concern among Somalis is the growing gap between parents and children, and the contrast between Dutch and Somali parenting styles; local initiatives have been organised to help bridge the gaps.

## Policing and security

Focus group participants, especially the young men, related experiences where their skin colour or other appearance seemed to make them more likely to be stopped by the police. Somalis are overrepresented in crime statistics, particularly unaccompanied minors, who have no family in the country to support or guide them. Amsterdam has adopted a series of anti-radicalisation programmes, aimed at both identifying potential threats and improving integration. The recent prohibition on khat has had an impact on the Somali community, and was a topic of concern in the focus groups; some blamed the use of this substance for problems within the Somali community, while others noted that banning its use will only increase criminal activity around it and make prices go up.

## Participation and citizenship

Most Somalis in the Netherlands eligible to do so are taking Dutch citizenship. Nevertheless, political participation is low, especially among young people, similar to young people in general in the Netherlands. No one of Somali background currently serves in the national parliament or the Amsterdam city council, which is inherent to the small size of the Somali community in the Netherlands and Amsterdam. Some respondents observed a lack of cohesion in the Somali community, and wondered about its implications for local and national representation. The civil society sector in Amsterdam includes a dozen Somali organisations, most of which are small. The largest runs language classes, helps arrange internships and supports Somali women. Broader, national Somali umbrella organisations represent Somalis at the national level. Young Somalis questioned the legitimacy of Somali organisations and recently established specific youth organisations.

## Role of the media

Cellphone and internet-based news sources are increasing popular in the Dutch Somali community; satellite television is also gaining viewers. In terms of how Somalis are featured in Dutch media, piracy appeared most often in a six-month monitoring of Somali-related news,

and overall, negative representations of Somalis dominated. Focus group participants also drew attention to stereotyping in the media. A series of short films about various aspects of Somali life in the Netherlands was aired on television in 2012 and 2013, to mixed responses, as it mainly focused on negative aspects such as problems around child welfare and terrorism.

## Recommendations

Whilst the community of Somalis in Amsterdam is very small, it is a diverse group scattered across the city. Dutch Somalis balance multiple identities, with their country of origin, religious identity and immigrant status, all playing roles. Struggles with the Dutch educational system and job market are common, as they are among other immigrant groups. A number of initiatives to address the specific concerns of Somalis could be expanded to other sectors; in particular, the role of civil society should be given support and room to grow, as it would enhance the role Somalis take in shaping policies, which has been very limited to date.

1. The City of Amsterdam should adopt policies that are general in their aims but recognise diversity by ensuring that such policies are equally effective for groups and individuals who face specific challenges.
2. The City of Amsterdam should work with the Dutch Council for Refugees, Somali and other immigrant organisations to assess the impact of the new Integration Act on key indicators of integration, such as the social impact of high unemployment, poor health, inadequate housing, and low educational attainment among immigrants and their children with a view to recommending changes in policy and practice that will deliver better results. Moreover, within the framework of the current integration policy, opportunities for additional support to Somali and other refugee groups should be explored in order to enhance the effectiveness of civic integration programmes and Dutch language courses.
3. The City of Amsterdam should address the key challenges faced by Somalis and other immigrant communities by multiple-faceted partnership approaches involving a range of interventions by key partners, including a strong role for Somali and other immigrant community organisations. In this way, their skills, knowledge, commitment and professional growth opportunities can be fully utilized in promoting integration, through activities such as information, guidance and advocacy for community members, language courses, training and mentoring, homework support, links with public services, support for parents and other activities.

## CONTACT INFO

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