

Report Part Title: Participation and Citizenship

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## 10. PARTICIPATION AND CITIZENSHIP

### 10.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss and analyse research findings regarding participation and citizenship. Feedback from stakeholders and a focus group with men aged 18–35 years old in Tower Hamlets forms the basis of the discussion. Chapter Four included a discussion of citizenship in the United Kingdom, including who is a citizen of the United Kingdom and what it entails, drawing on official definitions and feedback from Somalis who participated in the research. It should be noted that there is some overlap between this and Chapter Four, which focused on identity and belonging, as notions of citizenship, participation and integration relate to and underpin individual and collective belonging and identity formation.

This chapter begins by discussing the participation of British-Somalis in civil society, politics and policymaking. It then addresses the experiences of British-Somalis in trying to influence policy and decisions at the local and national levels, and considers the extent to which British-Somalis feel that they are able to influence such decisions. It also examines British-Somali membership of mainstream political parties and, finally, looks at Somali organisations at the local level.

### 10.2 Participation of British-Somalis in Civil Society, Politics and Policymaking

British-Somali civil society in London and across the United Kingdom is heavily involved in the rebuilding efforts in Somalia. Like many diaspora communities, efforts are sustained through a number of channels such as remittances and business opportunities. Charitable campaigns are launched to fund vital gaps in provision, for example medical care for remote towns and villages. These campaigns are often highlighted through Somali language satellite stations, mosques and fundraising events. Political developments are also keenly followed by the community.

Equally, British-Somali led community and voluntary sector organisations have championed the community's development in London by providing supplementary schools, welfare advice, youth activities and residential trips. There are 236 "Somali" charities officially registered with the Charity Commission in the United Kingdom.<sup>161</sup> The number of Somali mosques and madrassas appears to be increasing in response to the community's desire for knowledge and additional places of worship. Classes are delivered in Somali and English, and special prayers, such as *Taraweesh*, are performed during Ramadan (as they are in other mosques across the world). In Tower Hamlets, there is also the Somali Friends of Labour Group and the Ocean Somali Community Association (OSCA), which has recently formed a Somali School Governors Forum.

<sup>161</sup> See <http://www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-54/working-with-somali-diaspora-organisations-in-the-uk> (accessed 4 August 2014).

It was acknowledged by stakeholders that in spite of the long history of Somali residence in both Camden and Tower Hamlets, participation in mainstream civil society, politics and policymaking was extremely limited. Several stakeholders raised the need to increase political participation to create a more diverse political body, and the solution to this was considered to be to increase the number of Somali candidates in local government elections.

A number of decision-making bodies that Somali communities could become involved in were identified by stakeholders. For example: the Independent Advisory Group (police); representation as school governors; participation in the community cohesion forum; and participation in the community policy consultative group. The stakeholders interviewed did not have any knowledge of Somali involvement in these bodies, and research for this report was unable to access this information. From the focus group, there were some examples of local level participation in civil society:

I deal with the local community, helping those enquiring or having problems accessing services, but any services they are having problems accessing. It could be in health, or employment, benefits, in immigration, so it could be in that we help them anyway we can. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

However, there were constraints that prevented this:

To be honest with you, I have never participated in any society community groups, or even voluntary and I know it's a good thing to participate in groups. But I never had the time. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

### 10.3 Experiences of British-Somalis Trying to Influence Policy and Decisions at Local and National Levels

Feedback from stakeholders regarding Somali involvement in decision-making indicates that representative democratic mechanisms are under-utilised, with many Somalis not voting in local and national elections. It was suggested that communication with Somali communities regarding opportunities to influence decisions was limited, and that this results in limited awareness of the importance of exercising voting rights and participation. All stakeholders strongly felt that further efforts were needed to encourage engagement with democratic processes and political participation among Somali communities, and not just at the time of elections.

Several stakeholders commented that Somalis are very politically aware regarding the United Kingdom and internationally, and that they are particularly sensitive to foreign policy. This was also evident from all of the focus groups. However, it was felt that there were few participatory mechanisms, and that these were not well publicised. One stakeholder commented:

Somalis are a political people. They know lots about Somali politics, but they don't participate fully in the U.K. because barriers exist. People won't contact councillors and politicians because they don't feel that they are represented by

them, and also there are no real mechanisms for consultation. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

Stakeholders identified a number of barriers to Somali communities engaging with formal democratic processes. For example, people are unaware of the importance of engaging; although consultation meetings take place, they do not always involve interpreters, which means that people will not attend. Stakeholders commented that more communication regarding constitutional rights and responsibilities was urgently needed, and that lessons could be learned from the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets regarding political mobilisation. It was highlighted at the Roundtable Discussion that the Somali community is politically engaged in the Kilburn ward of Camden, possibly as a result of a Somali media campaign. Some focus group participants felt that the British-Somali community lacked an understanding of the importance of voting, while others suggested low participation reflected disillusionment with the political system:

One of the things we are lacking is that the Somali community is not aware how important it is to participate in local elections because they don't know how important it is to vote in this country or how important it is to vote. Because the person they vote for could improve their health services. I don't vote, that's just me. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

I did vote in the past a few times, but recently I have become discontent and stop votes because the politicians they were not answering some of the questions, for example the country is in a recession, people are going through difficult times, I didn't feel they did anything about it, so what's the point? (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

Anyway, politicians are known to be liars, they'll say they'll do everything for you up to the time they get your vote and they'll do nothing. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

Other focus group participants highlighted the lack of representation of Somalis and the need for collective action to effect change:

As Somalis, obviously, your voice is not listened to because you're not represented, so that one thing Somalis are lacking. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

In the council we don't have a voice because we have no Somali councillor. We have to show power to make it exist to have power. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

There was consensus among the focus group participants about the value of collective action, and how such action could bring about benefits and change for Somali communities. Several participants suggested community engagement and collective mobilisation as solutions to marginalisation:

Well, I think it's difficult if you approach your local MP or councillor, they'll see you an individual and may not take your views on as much for one vote, but

if you go together as a group or a pressure group, for example as 10 or 20 people, they might listen and say, "I'll listen to the things you're saying and I'll give you a response". As Somalis, we are lacking, we don't have a pressure group, so it's not going to change anything to be honest with you. (Tower Hamlets, man, 18–35).

Nothing can be achieved because you are one person, but if the community comes together we can go forward. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

I think they should be listening and engaging the community, there is a lack of engaging. They should employ Somali people in the council; if they are not engaging, then the problem will not be solved. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

Somali people they know what we need and understand our problems, from elderly to the youth they know our needs. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

Another participant indicated that they would vote for someone Somali, as they felt that they would best represent the Somali community:

Yes, definitely, if someone who is of a Somali background came around and said, "I'm running, vote for me", I would definitely vote for them and support them. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

Other focus group participants suggested that greater knowledge, better communication, training and education would act as incentives for Somalis to participate in democratic mechanisms:

I need knowledge, but I don't know where to go and how to find it. I feel that we are lost in this system and we need someone to give us advice ... to train people in the system to be in the system. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

What I think they should do ... to start including them in the decision-making is to give them more rights. For them to call them, if there is meetings we don't know about, most people don't know about it because there is a big gap between the community and the council. There is a communication problem, for them to shorten that gap and include more people, they should give more rights to the Somali community and given the know-how and training and more rights for them to bring the community and council together. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

There should be more of a consultation process in place for all Somali groups, whether they are elderly, youth, women, men, all age groups. Views and feedback to be respected and put forward. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

They should be ... educating the local community, because we are ignorant to what happens in democracies. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

## 10.4 Influence on Decisions at Local and National Levels

Focus group participants reported feeling unable to influence decisions on a number of levels due to isolation and feeling insecure:

A lot of us to don't feel too secure in the country we are living in or the borough we are living in, and that's probably one of the reasons why we don't have a voice in this country. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

You may have difficulties accessing other stuff, maybe because it's due to language barriers, a lot of Somalis in our community, they don't have a voice in the community because they basically are isolated from mainstream society. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

The lack of representation of Somalis in local and national positions was therefore seen to be a deterrent to participation, and this is then compounded by people not coming forward to participate:

The Somali community [is] disinterested and not engaged. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

How do you expect people to know we have problems if you are not willing to talk about it? (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

It's really frustrating, the problem is there but they are not willing to say, they are complaining but they're not putting it forward. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

My concern is not having the voice that should have because there is a big Somali community in the U.K., especially Tower Hamlets. There is a lot more that we should be doing to improve our community. There should be more councillors, more MPs more going to University and making something of themselves. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

Some stakeholders also commented that lack of empowerment and inequality compounded the lack of political engagement of Somali communities in London, with one stakeholder commenting that British-Somalis were “a very resilient yet vulnerable community”.

While there are no clear statistics, stakeholders felt that membership of political parties was low among Somali communities, and participants in the focus group discussion echoed this claim, highlighting that voting levels were also low. One focus group participant commented:

They don't encourage Somali to join political parties and if they do, then they don't have a chance to be stand and be elected, that's one thing they need to consider, so Somali can be a part of the decision-making. (Tower Hamlets, man 18–35)

### 10.5 Somali Organisations at the Local Level and its Members

A number of stakeholders commented on the lack of information on the numbers and demographics of Somalis in both Camden and Tower Hamlets. There are a large number of Somali community organisations in both boroughs, but few are active. Stakeholders suggested that community organisations played an important role in representing and advocating for Somalis, but that some may not be accessible to all due to clan affiliations.

Some stakeholders commented that if they wanted to engage with Somali communities, they would contact women's organisations first and foremost, as it is the women in the community who run the household and are the decision-makers.

A number of stakeholders commented on the funding for community organisations, which has been severely cut. Some stakeholders felt that this would mean that those inactive organisations would cease to exist, but that there could also be difficulties for those organisations providing much-needed advice and advocacy services in both boroughs. A small number of stakeholders recognised that only the most entrepreneurial organisations would survive in the present climate.

There are 32 voluntary and community organisations/groups in the borough of Tower Hamlets that directly target residents identifying as Somali. These run a range of services targeting children's underachievement through to services seeking to reduce isolation for housebound elders.

Two organisations use LBC buildings. The Somali Community Centre, Lismore Circus, receives 100 percent rent relief, approximately £8,000, lasting until March 2015 and the Somali Elderly and Disabled Centre, St Paul's Crescent, receives 100 percent rent relief, approximately £4,000, lasting until March 2014.

There is also funding for Somali community organisations for specific projects that help address key issues around health, education and welfare. Stakeholders in Camden identified a number of examples of organisations that receive such support. The first example is the British-Somali Community (BSC), a woman led refugee community organisation, run by and for Somali families in Camden. It receives funding for two projects. The first is for a two-year project to improve the health and well-being of Somali women, and the second is two years of funding for the Parent Support Project, which aims to raise awareness amongst parents and young people about the role of schools, police, social services, etc., their legal obligations and rights of parents. There is also support from Camden for the Somali Cultural Centre (SCC).

The SCC promotes education through the provision of language and other classes, as well as providing advice and information on issues relating to poverty. It received support for a Dementia Awareness Project (see above) and for advice services including an intervention service, so people do not enter crisis, and advocacy for people dealing with social services and schools.

Finally, there is the Somali Youth Development Resource Centre. The SYDRC aims to advance the education of Somali youth and to provide a range of activities. It receives funding for three projects: an early intervention programme to support young Somalis at risk of exclusion and those involved in gangs and gang-related crime; young men offending or re-offending; and a volunteer mentoring project which implements an early intervention approach in working with Somali young people. The SYDRC also receives funding to train a cohort of Public Space Champions to act as mentors or community mediators to improve Somali women's access to public space. Due to an increase in charges for football pitch hire, the SYDRC has received funding for one year to offset the cost of this to the organisation.<sup>162</sup>

### 10.6 Involvement of British-Somalis in Local Participation Mechanisms and Affirmative Measures Taken to Ensure Inclusion of Somalis

In the main, stakeholders felt that there was very limited involvement of British-Somalis in local participation mechanisms. An example was given regarding the absence of the Somali community on the agenda for meetings about borough priorities and targets that effectively act as a barrier and create invisibility at the local level.

There was recognition of the need to increase Somali representation in local and national government. An example of affirmative measures taken to ensure the inclusion of Somalis is the recent establishment of the Somali friends of Labour Group. A further example of affirmative measures is the "Uprising" initiative, which is a mentoring and leadership programme for promising 19–25-year-olds. This initiative was established in 2009, and there are a number of young Somalis involved in this. The rationale behind Uprising is that there is a need to explore and capitalise on the leadership potential of people from a variety of backgrounds. Young people who are placed on this programme learn—through experience—how political and other power systems operate in the United Kingdom and how people influence such systems. One stakeholder commented that it will take five to 10 years for the programme to have an effect in the world of politics and employment, but that a new generation of board members and representatives is being developed.

### 10.7 Summary

For some of the research participants, citizenship in the United Kingdom was straightforward, comprising of rights and opportunities in terms of education and employment. Integration was seen as a key component of citizenship, however, and there were recognised barriers to integration.

It seems evident too, that although Somalis are politically aware, both in terms of events in the country of origin and in the United Kingdom, they are not fully engaging

<sup>162</sup> Information received from the Stronger Communities Manager, Camden London Borough Council, on 1 April 2014.



with participatory democratic mechanisms and their involvement in civil society is limited. There were no examples of affirmative action aimed at Somali communities and there was an historical lack of ethnic monitoring information.