



## The Somali community in the UK: What we know and how we know it. Launch of a report by the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAR)

House of Commons, Committee Room 10  
July 8<sup>th</sup> 2004  
Chaired by Jeremy Corbyn (MP for Islington North)

### Panel

Kirsteen Tait (ICAR director)  
Hermione Harris (author of report)  
Mohammed Omaar (executive director of the Association of London Somali Organisations)  
Nuradin Dirie (chair of Somali Co-ordinating Committee)  
Khadija Shireh (British Somali Community Women's Association)

This report briefly summarises a seminar held at the House of Commons and attended by 75 people including representatives of the Somali community, refugee agencies, academics, funders, and local authority staff. The event launched the ICAR report *The Somali community in the UK: What we know and how we know it*, which is available online at <http://www.icar.org.uk/content/proj/prs.html> or by contacting [victoria.seymour@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:victoria.seymour@kcl.ac.uk). The event was very kindly hosted and chaired by Jeremy Corbyn, MP for Islington North. This summary is intended only to flag the main themes discussed and ways forward suggested, and in no way reflects the richness of the discussion or the complexity of the issues that arose.

### Introduction

Kirsteen Tait (director of ICAR) introduced the seminar by describing the work of ICAR and explaining why ICAR had commissioned the report and what the organisation hoped to achieve by publishing it.


She described ICAR as an information centre that aims to produce accurate and unbiased evidence that can be used to influence policy-making. It is not an advocacy organisation but instead focuses on gathering information from a number of different sources. These sources include: academia; central and local government; refugee agencies; non-governmental organisations; refugees and asylum seekers; and members of the public.

She explained that while there is not a lack of research on the Somali community, the existing research needed to be pulled together into a report that reflects the 'state of knowledge' and takes stock of the current situation. This is the aim of this report. Evidence shows that there is a need for action rather than more research, and it is hoped that the report will feed in to the government's revised national strategy for refugee integration.

She emphasised the importance of obtaining feedback on the report and asked for comments on how the report fits in with community experiences and research; how the report can best be used; and how ICAR can assist the Somali community with regards to pressing for action on the issues highlighted by the research.

### Research focus and methods

Hermione Harris (author) explained that the main focus of the research was the collection and analysis of secondary material, but that she had also contextualised her findings by speaking to members of the Somali population.



She indicated that she had found a total of 138 published items on Somalis in the UK. Books made up 4% of the material; academic articles 6%; theses 9% (a few were published) and reports 60%. In general the material was very hard to identify and locate, and it seemed that the information contained within this body of work had not been widely circulated. This meant that much of it is repetitive and often reaches the same conclusions. She made the point that some organisations are no longer aware of the reports that they have commissioned in the past and are therefore unlikely to be acting on the recommendations made therein.

She also suggested that Somalis have developed 'research fatigue', because so much research has been conducted on their community and they have seen so little result. This assertion was confirmed by Nuradin Dirie (panellist), who explained that the Somali community has been calling for action to be taken on the many research findings now available.

## **Invisibility**

An academic in the audience commented that the use of the term 'invisibility' may not be always be appropriate, as authorities sometimes ignore data about the Somali community even when it is available.

### *Statistics*

The general perception of Somalis in the UK is that there is very little known about them – Somalis often refer to themselves as the 'invisible community'. However, this is surprising given the fact that it is a long-standing community whose numbers have increased over the last two decades.

One of the reasons why this impression that little is known about Somalis in the UK persists is perhaps because there is contradictory information about the size of the population. The 2001 census estimates that there are 44,000 Somali-born residents in the UK. A 2003 report on Somalis in Hackney estimates that there are 95,000 Somalis in the country. The 2001 census estimated that there were 34,000 Somalis in London, while a 2003 report estimated that there were 70,000 in the capital.


Different surveys base their estimates on different samples, causing some of the confusion around numbers. It is important to define what the term 'Somali' means in order to understand exactly which category of people is being measured. For example, the 2001 census only recorded Somali-born residents and did not cover people who were born in the UK but who may still define themselves as Somali – e.g. second or third generation immigrants. The census only offers general categories such as 'Black African' or 'Other' when recording data on ethnicity. It is also important to note that the number of Somali asylum seekers is not captured by the census. There is also anecdotal evidence to suggest that even the number of Somali-born respondents to the 2001 census questionnaire was low.

### *Poverty*

Oona King (MP for Bethnal Green and Bow) emphasised that the highest density of poverty in her constituency is amongst the Somali community, but that poverty indicators generally relate to the Bangladeshi community. She argued that resources need to be geared towards problems that are Somali-specific, and that research must be prolific, clear and factual in order to initiate policy change.

### *Media*

Another reason for the impression that Somalis constitute an 'invisible community' is because there is very little coverage of the Somali population in the media. The media sub-group of the Somali Community Meetings convened by Jeremy Corbyn has highlighted the fact that there were 714 pieces written about the murder of Damilola Taylor, which stands in stark contrast to the 21 pieces written about the murder of the



Somali teenager Kayser Osman. Furthermore, when reporting about the Somali community does occur, it is often negative.

### *General comments*

Mohammed Omaar (panellist) stated that there is a need for cohesion in the Somali community and that lack thereof partly explains their 'invisibility.' One of the challenges to achieving cohesion is that the Somali community are spread out in small pockets across London. This is in contrast to the Bangladeshi community, which is more or less concentrated in the one area. He stated that the Somali community has to come together in order to be visible and to make impact. He also underlined the need for Somali communities and businesses to be built up. He stated that there were 50 Somali businesses on Wembley High Street that served the Somali community. These businesses pay an estimated half a million pounds in rent and rates every year but they are not visible. It was pointed out by Nuradin Dirie that Somalis have a strong presence on the Internet and that many internet shops are owned by Somali people.

### **Negative portrayal**

Another important issue is the kind of information that is being produced about the Somali community and how this affects its public profile. The material covered by the ICAR report presents the community in terms of failures or deficiencies and consequently 'problematise' it. At worst, the Somali community is presented as needy and dependent on the state. What the reports fail to do is focus on the positive achievements in the community, such as the establishment of drop-in centres, community groups, and businesses.

Nuradin Dirie highlighted the importance of creating a holistic picture of the Somali community by not only focussing on the problems of the community but also the aspirations that it has and the contribution that it makes to the UK. He argued that as a group they were resolute and determined to help themselves.

Jeremy Corbyn (chair) emphasised the need to celebrate successes and commented that the Somali community is strong and vibrant with numerous examples of success and achievement.

### **Somali voice**

Another weakness in the type of publications produced on Somalis is that Somalis themselves do not feature heavily in the production of the research. About a third of reports surveyed by ICAR involve Somalis in some way, but Somalis do not feature as authors or commissioners of the work.

In general, the reports also seemed to be reluctant to use qualitative material and were not good at putting across what it 'feels like' to be marginalised or disempowered. There is an over-emphasis on questionnaires and a lack of 'real voices' coming through.

Nuradin Dirie pointed out that Somalis have a strong oral tradition and that form-filling is not the most appropriate way of obtaining information from this community. He also appreciated the way in which the report illuminates the 'journey of the Somali person' and he felt that it is necessary for policy makers to understand the experiences of Somali people before service providers can respond with the appropriate services. It was suggested that oral history projects would be useful tools to the Somali community.

### **Asylum**

The issue of asylum policies was discussed. Nuradin Dirie expressed the view that these policies are directed towards Somalis, and that the government's repatriation of Somali asylum seekers whose claims



have failed was unwise, as it will hinder integration. He observed that the asylum policy focuses on reducing asylum numbers without addressing the root causes of asylum flows.

Jeremy Corbyn commented that each asylum law is worse than the last one, and that after each bill is passed the courts interject to mitigate its severity, in turn causing the introduction of yet another bill. The number of asylum seekers on the street is increasing. The Somali community suffers when ELR (exceptional leave to remain) is awarded, as it grants no rights to family reunion. He feels that the family reunion process needs to be speeded up.

The director of a refugee organisation in West London commented that there is a need for an independent documentation centre to produce the evidence used by the Home Office when assessing asylum claims. Jeremy Corbyn agreed with this and added that the existing country information is biased: the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has an interest in ensuring that its initiatives are a success and is therefore more likely to say that a country's problems have been resolved, while the Country Information and Policy Unit (CIPU) is biased towards the position of the Home Office.

There was general agreement in the audience and amongst the panellists that asylum seekers should be able to work while their claim is being decided and that it seems an illogical policy to keep people in poverty. Fears were also expressed that EU countries compete over how harshly asylum seekers should be treated and that the development of EU asylum policy is not carried out in a transparent manner.

### **Public life**

There are a large number of professionals in the Somali community, but they are grossly underrepresented in the fields of health, education and politics (there is no Somali MP, for example). There are potential candidates for these public sector positions, but there is a lack of language-training and courses for converting professional qualifications.

This underrepresentation creates a vicious circle, as the less represented Somalis are in public life the less they are able to influence public policy and the less likely it becomes that the issues affecting them will be addressed. It is therefore very important to work out how to make the Somali voice heard.

### **Family, education, religion and gender**

Khadija Shireh (panellist) noted the cultural barriers experienced by Somali families. Her presentation focused on the way work is divided along gender lines in many Somali households, where women are expected to stay at home while the men are responsible for the welfare of the family. She explored the complex relationship between religion and culture, which some members of the Somali community may use to limit the roles of women in terms of leadership or career development. She also explained the fact that the man's role is often lessened upon arriving in the UK because he cannot work to support his family, and explored the tensions in the family that ensue. Another problem faced by many Somali families is the inflexibility of UK employers in regards to childcare commitments.

Concern was expressed that Somalis are underachieving at school because of limited language abilities and family problems.

A member of the Somali community also expressed concern that the consequences of the Female Genital Mutilation Act are not common knowledge in the Somali community.

### **Government strategy/funding**



There was a general concern that the government has not developed a strategy on the Somali community. Jeremy Corbyn commented that he submitted parliamentary questions about governmental expenditure on the Somali population, and there is very little spent specifically on Somalis.

## Future research

### *Institutional racism*

An academic in the audience suggested that the ICAR report could be further developed by looking into institutional racism in the context of the Somali community. She also suggested that the development of best practice guidelines would be helpful.

It was noted that some publications on Somalis released since the ICAR report have focused the role played by institutional racism. A member of the audience suggested that studies looking at institutional racism would benefit from an emphasis on how the community responds to such racism and how this reaction may differ from that of other communities. He also suggested that examples of how other communities have progressed positively could be learnt from and used as potential models.

The issue of access to justice was also suggested as an area of potential research within the more general category of institutional racism.

### *Educational achievement*

An academic stated that Somalis face problems in schools for a number of complex reasons. She observed that there were two authorities in London where Somalis had out-performed their classmates at GCSE level. These authorities had implemented special programmes that supported the children and worked with the parents. She suggested that it would be helpful to produce a document on initiatives that have worked, and observed that relatively small mounts of money are needed in order to achieve beneficial outcomes.

### *Clanship*

There was a strong feeling amongst the Somali panellists and members of the audience that the Somali community in the UK needs to concentrate on the issues that face them here and not to become embroiled in the clan and tribal divisions that persist in Somalia.

## Future work for ICAR

Nuradin Dirie suggested that ICAR could develop an 'action plan' or a 'monitoring system' so that there is some impetus for the research conclusions to be put in to practice.

He also suggested that ICAR could mainstream information that had been collected from the community.

## Conclusions

Kirsteen Tait concluded the meeting by:

- emphasising the need for better demographic data
- highlighting the need for examples of good practice where small amounts of money have had beneficial and tangible effects



- emphasising the need to monitor and evaluate the implementation of recommendations offered by researchers

She argued that the volume of recommendations made in some recent reports about the Somali community had made it difficult to focus, and that ICAR had therefore chosen to select only two issues that need to be addressed:

- The first is that of young people, as this is a theme that is often raised by the community itself.
- The second is that of the need for improved English language provision, as without it Somalis will remain unable to realise their potential.

