



# METROPOLIS CONVERSATION

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THE METROPOLIS CONVERSATION SERIES BRINGS TOGETHER RESEARCHERS, POLICYMAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS TO IDENTIFY AND EXPLORE CURRENT PUBLIC POLICY DEBATES. EACH CONVERSATION IS A CLOSED AND HIGHLY-FOCUSED MEETING PROMOTING CANDID FACE-TO-FACE EXCHANGES. THE GATHERINGS ARE SMALL AND INCLUDE CAREFULLY SELECTED PEOPLE WHO SHARE COMMON INTERESTS, BUT VARYING PERSPECTIVES.



# METROPOLIS

## INTEGRATING YOUNG CANADIANS OF MINORITY BACKGROUNDS INTO MAINSTREAM CANADIAN SOCIETY: THE CASE OF SOMALI YOUTH

**LAMIA NAJI**

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METROPOLIS PROJECT  
[WWW.METROPOLIS.NET](http://WWW.METROPOLIS.NET)

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# INTRODUCTION

Over 80% of the Somali-Canadian community, one of Canada's largest African minority groups, is under 30 years of age. Having been born in Canada or immigrated at a young age, a number of Somali youth are experiencing difficulty integrating into mainstream Canadian society. Why, despite their upbringing in Canada and access to social institutions, are some Somali-Canadian youth, exhibiting relatively poor societal outcomes?

To assess the migration experience of Somalis in Canada and better understand their experiences of social exclusion, 16 selected participants from national and foreign government, academia, and civil society took part in an informative and comprehensive discussion organized by the Metropolis Project. The specific questions guiding the Conversation were:

1. How do we define successful refugee re-settlement— is the offer of protection *enough*?
2. What have been the long-term implications of the initial settlement experience for previous/new Somali refugees and asylum seekers?
3. What are the underlying causes of the poor integration outcomes for some young Somali-Canadians?
4. What efforts are aimed at improving the short and long term integration experience of Somali-Canadian youth?
5. What should the roles of the federal, provincial and municipal governments be? How can we prevent similar problems for future asylum seekers or refugees?

Ultimately, responses to these questions revealed that the challenges faced by young Somali Canadians largely reflect a broader phenomenon: the experiences of low-income minority and immigrant youth residing in metropolitan Canadian cities. In particular, specific aspects of immigration, the public education system and social housing appear, in one form or another, to diminish the possibilities of a healthy and successful integration experience.

Notwithstanding general commonalities, however, the integration experience of Somali youth into mainstream Canadian society is found to be unique due to the complex migration experience of first-generation Somalis to Canada in the late 1980s and early 1990s; the actual and perceived effects of 'dual strikes' against Somali youth stemming from their racial (black) and religious (Muslim) composition; and the relatively large size of the Somali-Canadian community.

This report will describe the major recurring themes of the Metropolis Conversation on Somali youth, including the initial settlement experience of Somali-Canadians; youth identity construction; and the public perception of Somalis in Canada. The report will conclude with a note on refugee re-settlement and recommendations suggested by the participants.

## **BACKGROUND, INITIAL SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCE AND THE FIRST-GENERATION**

The arrival of Somali refugees in Canada largely took place between 1988 and 1994. Prior to the late 1980s, only a few Somalis, mainly students and political exiles, lived in Canada. The ousting of General Siad Barre in 1991 and the subsequent outbreak of civil war coupled with a longstanding famine forced over one million Somalis to flee to neighbouring countries, Europe and North America.

Seeking protection, Somalis applied for Convention Refugee Status upon arrival to Canada and were subsequently afforded permanent resident status, typically within six months to three years of their arrival. The large influx of Somalis to Canada and suspicions of manipulation of Canada's immigration system resulted in changes to Canada's Immigration Act in 1993 that specifically affected Somali migrants. According to the Act, Convention Refugee Status would only be afforded to those in possession of 'satisfactory identity documents', leaving migrants without appropriate papers in a long period of limbo. Unable to retrieve documents due to the political turmoil in Somalia, Somali migrants waited as long as a decade to receive Convention Refugee Status. This delay lengthened the wait for permanent residency meaning that Somalis faced discrimination in access to education (mainly secondary and higher education), employment and social assistance. Repercussions from this policy curtailed their integration experience and that of subsequent generations. As many Somali households are female headed, a lack of support mechanisms for women and little education often meant greater difficulties in finding employment and less flexibility to support children, resulting in greater prospects for youth challenges in the long-run.

An important distinction to keep in mind with respect to the settlement experience of first-generation Somalis in particular is the response by the Canadian mainstream. Compared to the arrival of the Vietnamese 'Boat People' in 1979 and 1980, for instance, it has been argued that Canadians were relatively ill prepared to receive Somalis, uninformed of the plight of the Somali people. The Vietnamese case is a Canadian success story because, with the help of federal government assistance, various church and community groups voluntarily undertook initiatives to welcome and assist those who fled communism. Conversely, Canadians were largely taken aback by the arrival of Somalis resulting in miscommunication on both sides as migration-related trauma, 'limbo' status and arrival to a foreign country shocked Somali migrants. Failing to provide first-generation Somalis adequate settlement services, including mental health support, during their initial phases of arrival, therefore, played a detrimental role in their integration.

## **PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF SOMALIS IN CANADA**

Despite the many success stories and the resilience of the Somali-Canadian community, public opinion of Somali-Canadians is greatly shaped by negative depictions which can lead to racism, prejudice and Islamophobia. Since the arrival of Somalis in Canada, the perception of the Somali community by mainstream Canadian society has largely been moulded by the media and geopolitics. Media analyses reveal that reporting on the 1992 and 1993 Peacekeeping missions in Somalia presented Somalis as either victims or warlords, while coverage of the 'War on Terror' and piracy have cast Somalis

as perpetrators. Domestically, the rendering of Somali youth as drug-dealers and ‘home-grown’ extremists has further tainted how Somali-Canadians are perceived.

These negative perceptions contribute to a hostile environment towards Somali-Canadians in academic, employment and social settings. This seriously impedes their integration experience by directly lowering their confidence and self-esteem and providing reasons for the formation of a defensive attitude as well as self-alienation.

## **CONSTRUCTING AN IDENTITY: FINDING THE APPROPRIATE BALANCE**

Somali-Canadian youth, like many immigrant youth, face the challenge of reconciling the cultural traditions of their country of origin with the cultural norms of Canadian society. This means making the family happy at home and fitting into the societal mainstream. As young Somalis are challenged in negotiating two very different worlds, a lack of effective guidance (mentorship that recognizes and understands *both* worlds) gives rise to difficulties with respect to finding an appropriate balance.

The Somali identity is principally shaped by Islam and cultural practises that collectively form the everyday decisions and lives of the Somali people. In the eyes of first-generation parents, elements of Canadian mainstream culture, largely encountered in school settings and through popular media, contradict what is considered as being Somali. This includes contrasts in terms of dress, mannerisms and opinions as the second-generation adopt relatively more liberal belief-systems. A major variation between Somali and Canadian values, for example, is that the former emphasizes the family unit while the latter encourages individual freedom and independence. Naturally, these differences create an intergenerational gap between first and second generation Somali-Canadians.

Tensions can arise in the home as the intergenerational gap widens. For instance, as youth gain skills and become translators and interpreters for their parents in everyday interactions, the power dynamic shifts from parent to child, giving rise to non-traditional role-reversals. Further, with access to knowledge-based employment, the second-generation can also be confronted with what can be the conflicting obligations of financially supporting the family and pursuing personal endeavours.

Challenges of constructing an individual identity also arise for reasons relating to race. Somalia is a homogenous society where differences are mainly along tribal clan lines or regions of origin, and not race. Somali youth, as one participant put it, must therefore learn how to be ‘black’ in Canadian society, a concept foreign to their parents. Since the first-generation is largely unable to assist with this process, many Somali youth, especially males, look to what is considered mainstream, black identity and the media for a sense of belonging. As the traditional Somali identity embodies Islam and traditional practices, youth are once again confronted with another set of ideals that clash with what they are *supposed* to be at home (Somali) and outside (‘black’). This is a particular challenge for youth who are born in Canada and may not completely understand the nuances of their Somali heritage. While most Somali youth identify as being Somali, the construction of a black identity— which they perceive is a necessary societal component due to the colour of their skin— inevitably leads to confusion. The confusion is

problematic since Somali and black identity seem to have a negative correlation as greater immersion in black culture tends to mean further distance away from the expectations of parents and Somali culture.

The so-called black identity in North America is largely represented by African American and Caribbean cultures. As such, norms of these groups, including Hip Hop and Reggae music, tend to have a strong influence on many Somali youth. Programs such as 'Black Entertainment Television' (BET), which showcases music videos and life from the perspective of black America, resonate with Somali youth who feel they can relate to the experiences presented (for example, single-parent homes, marginalization, discrimination and poverty) . Popular mainstream media can have negative effects on youth development since it, for example, largely limits the role of a successful black male to a rapper, thug, drug dealer or athlete. In the absence of a positive male role model, this proves unpromising for many Somali males.

Young Somali females usually tend to integrate more successfully than males due to their determination to 'not let their mothers down'. However, a young female Somali participant raised the concern that some Somali females are starting to demonstrate less favourable outcomes with respect to education (mainly at the secondary level) and trouble with the law. A growing willingness to partake in Al-Shabab related activities in Somalia is consistent with these concerns.

Overall, in the process of constructing an individual identity, a lack of appropriate and gender-specific mentorship creates uncertainty on how to balance cultural, parental and societal obligations. This can result in an individual feeling no belonging anywhere or choosing between two cultures (and sometimes either extreme) as opposed to embracing the values of both.

## **PUBLIC EDUCATION**

Education is a key determinant of occupational success in Canadian society. One would assume that exposure to primary, elementary and secondary education in Canada would cultivate a successful integration experience for the children of immigrants and minority youth. This Conversation revealed critical barriers in the public education system that culturally and systematically inhibits the integration experience for Somali and visible minority youth at-large.

There is a noticeable difference in how education is perceived between Somali culture and Canadian mainstream culture. In the former, the role of the school and the educator is distinct and separate from the role of the family such that the teacher and institutions of the school are seen as responsible for a child's education experience. In the latter however, there is an expectation that a child's education experience is facilitated by the active support and participation of the parent which is demonstrated through homework help, guidance and volunteerism, among other initiatives. In many instances, immigrant parents, displaying their cultural understanding of what teaching is, often leave all the decision making to the school authorities, not informed of their vital and crucial roles to the development of curriculum policies and the advancement of their child.

This difference in expectations between the school and the Somali parent, if overlooked and misunderstood, presents serious challenges for a Somali-Canadian child going through the education system, often increasing the possibility for a child to fall behind at an early age. This dilemma is further frustrated as public education systems interpret falling behind as indicating a 'learning disability' or behavioural problems. In primary and elementary schools, for instance, diagnoses of autism are high among Somali children. Researchers as well as members of the Somali community, including doctors, are wary of the number of reported cases, especially since an increasing number of 'hyper boys' are diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Hyperactivity can be a reflection of not knowing how to behave in an academic setting and not necessarily an illness. Assessments for ADHD or autism are problematic because they are costly, standardized, and do not incorporate cross-cultural circumstances. Similarly, at the secondary level, there is a high proportion of Somali and minority youth in applied, technical courses as opposed to academic, university preparing courses. The down-streaming of Somali and visible minority youth effectively diminishes post-secondary education options and career opportunities from as early as the ninth grade.

There is a stigma associated with 'learning disabilities' or applied courses which can cause minority youth to believe that they are in fact less academically oriented than their peers. This can result in a decrease in morale and higher probabilities of dropping out. Sentiments of this kind were said to cause young Somali males to bring themselves down when they are together. Dropping out is also more likely if youth feel they cannot relate to the course offerings or curriculum.

Further, there is a general sense that minority and immigrant youth face harsher punishments in schools in the form of suspensions and expulsions as teachers are said to report behavioural concerns without proper contexts and without further critical attempts to understand underlying problems.

Finally, many minority youth who have resiliently pursued post-graduate education are having difficulty finding employment due to a lack of knowledge on how to navigate the labour market. This primarily involves challenges arising from not having established support systems, connections or networks in key areas of employment as well as unfamiliarity with initiatives available through academic institutions such as FSWEF and Co-operative education.

## **SOCIAL HOUSING: 'A POSINED BENEFIT'**

While social housing makes accommodation affordable for low-income households, it was found that social housing, in many instances, has the potential to perpetuate the marginalization and disintegration of minority youth. For new immigrant families and minority groups moving into municipal social housing neighbourhoods, the presence of residents from similar cultural backgrounds and experiences can facilitate a more comfortable transition for parents and their offspring.

In the long-run, however, social housing can have negative consequences. Social housing serves various groups in the low-income spectrum including the mentally ill, drug-users, and previous criminal offenders. Naturally, the 'neighbourhood effect' can present an unhealthy environment for children and youth who grow up in these areas.

Moreover, a high presence of a specific minority group within a social housing complex can discourage outward mobility and makes possible the establishment of social-housing-created ethnic enclaves. These settings present greater risks for youth, particularly males, by creating a disconnect between community housing neighbourhoods and mainstream society. This disconnect can condone 'group think' and in turn prevent youth from reaching their potential in academic and employment spheres. It can also encourage youth to seek alternative methods of subsistence, including involvement in the lucrative drug-trade.

Not all social housing neighbourhoods present risky environments for minority youth. Different social housing areas can share similar population sizes and demographics but convey different societal outcomes based on the social housing grouping or location in a city. It is evident, however, that in many instances the realities of social housing communities do not reflect the ideals of the 'Canadian' community. These realities can impede youth development.

## **CONCLUSION: RE-THINKING REFUGEE RE-SETTLEMENT**

Refugee re-settlement is normally considered to be limited to bringing refugees to Canada to live permanently. While today's settlement services are more sophisticated than in previous decades, the question remains whether protection is enough, given the high possibility of poor long-term societal outcomes. Effectively, how does Canada balance humanitarian protection obligations and the realities that some refugee communities *will* struggle?

Evidently, prospects of a successful integration experience within Canada depends on various factors including the existence of established community support networks, language competencies, access to essential social resources and skills development. With this in mind, the federal government must consider the short and long-term consequences of failing to provide the necessary tools to obtain such resources upon arrival and replicate best practises applied in Canadian success stories. While the financial costs of offering assistance to asylum seekers may seem high, they are arguably outweighed by the long-term social consequences of not providing adequate support, as made evident by the experience of Somali-Canadians and other newcomer groups. This is especially the case since many asylum seekers do in fact receive refugee status.

Accordingly, considerations of how to better equip the mainstream in welcoming newcomers must be taken seriously to ensure that the population is informed of the context and struggles faced by both refugee and asylum communities. If immigration and multiculturalism are to be conveyed as defining fundamental characteristics of Canada's mosaic, delivering on the promise of a new and meaningful life must be at the forefront of refugee re-settlement policy.

## **RECCOMENDATIONS**

The following comprehensive recommendations were suggested by the participants in the Metropolis Conversation. Some recommendations are specific to Somali youth:

### *Refugee Re-settlement*

- Review refugee re-settlement legislation to ensure all vulnerable groups, including asylum seekers and government assisted refugees (GARs), are provided with adequate support systems
- Ensure that females heading households, under the Government Assisted Refugee programme, receive adequate support to integrate into Canadian society by providing resources such as language and employment training and child care supports
- Re-define protection to include more support measures for asylum seekers
- Equip the mainstream population and non-governmental organizations with resources that will inform the public of new arrivals and facilitate a healthy exchange between host communities and refugees

### *Embedding a Positive Outlook of Somalis and Minorities in Canada*

- Address racism and Islamophobia in all levels of government to create a space for inter-cultural dialogue.
- Recognize the achievement of leaders in visible minority communities through awards provided by government, particularly at the municipal level, to encourage the continuance of leadership initiatives

### *Education*

- Create integrated and holistic community support systems and programs for immigrant families within institutional frameworks
- Integrate the histories and experiences of students in classrooms provincial curriculums
- Incorporate strategies that maximize the roles of guidance councillors to accommodate immigrant and second-generation youth, especially those who are also working to support their families
- Increase the number of settlement workers and translators in schools
- Establish a more visible partnership between schools and parents that involves an equal sharing of power and information to make clear the expectations of both the student and parent
- Look to alternative methods of discipline (i.e. alternatives to suspensions and expulsions) in school settings to remove a sense of disproportionate punishment on minority youth
- Carefully, and through cross-cultural considerations, assess behavioural irregularities prior to diagnosing a student with ADHD



- Create mechanisms for the oversight and evaluation of programs directed at the academic achievement of marginalized youth
- Support community after-school and weekend programming such as Somali language training and homework help that can improve academic performance while also help in providing a sense of belonging

### *Social Housing*

- Identify methods to encourage home ownership and offer training sessions on loans and micro-financing in consideration of traditional and religious beliefs
- Ensure municipal social housing agencies are not promoting the creation of ethnic enclaves in social housing
- Engage youth of lower socioeconomic statuses by offering after-school programming, homework help and extra-curricular activities free of charge which can act as channels to bridge youth into mainstream society

### *Government*

- Increase the recruitment of visible minorities into the public service and political spheres to reflect Canada's diverse population
- Recognize the development of minority youth as a security priority in the Budget and government agendas
- *Ministries of Education:*
  - Invest in curriculum development to facilitate inclusiveness and representativeness
  - Incorporate intensive training in teacher's college on diversity and exceptionalities
  - Implement programs on anti-bullying specifically on race and Islamophobia.
- *Ministries of health:*
  - Address the cultural knowledge gap and the absence of translators to facilitate appropriate translation and interpretation
  - Expand access to essential resources and consider ways to include cross-cultural considerations in assessment procedures
- *Municipal governments:*
  - Encourage funding and support for extra-curricular activities such as 'dugsi' and soccer programs. Fund more and provide alternative programming for girls.

### *Youth Development*

- Build on the leadership of the 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation which is vital to providing mentorship to younger peers sharing similar experiences
- Invest in coalition support programs such as Pathways to Education

- Provide resources that facilitate skills development and networking opportunities at an early stage
- Invest in culturally and gender-specific youth support in areas of mental health, post-traumatic stress and guidance on how to negotiate identities of conflicting cultures
- Inform youth on post-graduate education opportunities including FSWEF, Co-operative education and studying abroad
- Encourage a focus on youth-led initiatives and youth involvement in decision making in community programming