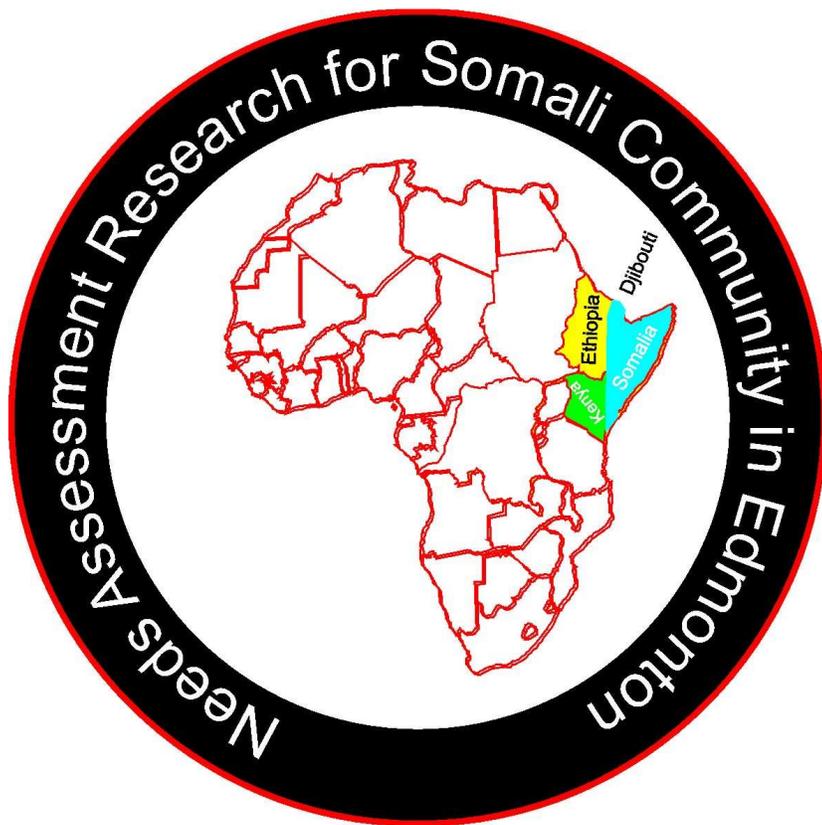


# 2007



*Somalis in Edmonton came from a region known as “Somali Peninsula” (Horn of Africa).*

*“Of all the problems created or left unsolved by colonial rule in Africa, none is as potentially dangerous as that of Somali division in the east of the continent. From the Horn of Africa itself to the west stretch the Somali people, most of them today in the Somali republic, some of them French Somaliland, some in Kenya’s Northern District, some in the eastern regions of Ethiopia, and nearly all of them passionately loyal to a united Somali nation”*

*African Profile, p 154, Ronald Segal Penguin Books, 1962.*

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**2007**

# Needs Assessment Research

*for Somali Community in Edmonton*

by



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## **Introduction**

- ✪ The Somali community in Edmonton is relatively new and small, with limited resources. The kind of challenges face by the Somali community in Edmonton is similar to those challenges faced by other immigrant communities in the city. Limited proficiency in the English language, limited affordable housing, unemployment/underemployment, insufficient social support, inadequate settlement service, as well as lack of information and referrals, are the key barriers faced by Somali community.
- ✪ These barriers prevented the community members, such as seniors, women, youth, families and children, to access fully the social support programs and resources that are available to the other immigrant communities as well as Canadian mainstream.
- ✪ Nevertheless, the Somali community is struggling to settle in and establish a self-sufficient, functional and visible community in Edmonton, and their determination to succeed is unambiguously tremendous.
- ✪ The Needs Assessment Research for Somali Community in Edmonton is the first research of its kind that ever conducted in Alberta and particularly in Edmonton and its surrounding areas. For the first time, the Government of Alberta, City of Edmonton and local immigrant service providing Agencies, invited group of Somali professional to introduce the culture, history, values, concerns, barriers and challenges and priorities of the Somali community in Edmonton. The professionals had passionately accepted the invitation and expressed the needs, issues and aspirations of the Somali community, with the hope that their call will be heard and answered by all levels of the Canadian government, municipal, provincial and federal.
- ✪ In order to tackle the needs of the Somali community in Edmonton, the professionals from the Somalis proposed to the government levels to fund a needs assessment research that will shed light on the specific needs, challenges and barriers that hinder the Somali community to integrate and engage into the civic life of Edmonton. The proposal was accepted and funded by stakeholders and eventually started its formal execution on January 2007.

- ✪ This ethnographic and needs assessment research, however, was not rigorous one because of limited time and resource, so that it reached and interviewed with 515 families (2541 individuals). Also focus groups from women, community leaders, elders and religious leaders were convened. The data recovered from the interviewees and focus groups were analyzed and documented.
  
- ✪ However, the outcome(s) of this research might not be able to fully articulate about the struggle of the Somali women, youth, children and seniors in Edmonton. We do sincerely hope, that this modest research will clearly reflect the resettlement experience of the Somali community in Edmonton.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **The origin of the Somali people**

**S**omalis in Canada came from a region known as “Somali Peninsula” (The Horn of Africa). While the majority of Somalis in Horn Africa live in Somali Republic and Djibouti, there are Somali regions in Kenya and Ethiopia where the majority of the inhabitants are Somalis.

*Somalia is bordered on the North by the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, on the East by the Indian Ocean, on the West by the Somali Plateau bordering on Ethiopia and on the South and South-West by Kenya. For countless ages this territory had an identity and was known as Somaliland and the people of the land known as Somalis from one end of the country to the other (<sup>1</sup>)*

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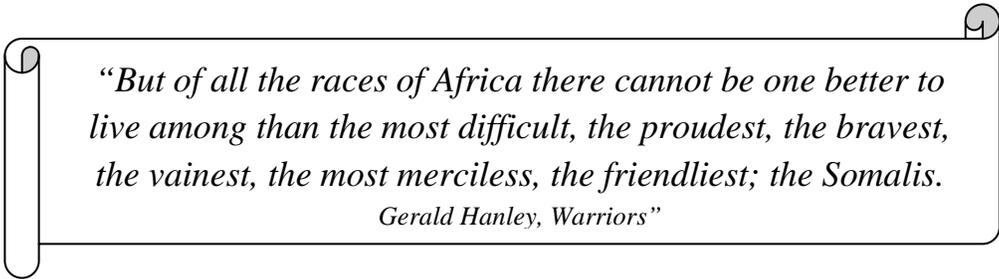
<sup>1</sup> . The portion of Somali territory under Ethiopia colonization. P#14, Mogadishu, June 1974.

## Language

The official language of the Somali people is Somali. Although it is one of the richest languages in the region, the Somali language had no written form prior to 1972. Since then, Somali language became the administrative language and the language of instruction of the schools. The script of the Somali language is based on the Latin alphabet.

Arabic is the second language of the Somali peoples, and before the Somali language was written, Arabic was the language of instruction at the elementary schools. English or Italian were taught at the intermediate and high school, since Somalia was colonized by British, Italy, and France. But after 1980, only the post-secondary education was taught in foreign (Italian or English) language.

## Human Characteristics



*“But of all the races of Africa there cannot be one better to live among than the most difficult, the proudest, the bravest, the vainest, the most merciless, the friendliest; the Somalis.*

*Gerald Hanley, Warriors”*

Somali people are characterized as; very proud, friendly and intelligent by many observers. Carl Hansen said “Observers of the Somali personalities are impressed by the intelligence, arrogance, cunning, independence and volatile temperament. Somalis are proud of their Hamitic – Semitic features. They are practical pragmatic and suspicious.”<sup>2</sup>

British special envoy to Somalia, Major Sweyn, who extensively traveled through the country in late 19<sup>th</sup> century while he was conducting the first official survey in Somali territory, wrote;

*“The Somali has a many-sided character. He is generally a good camel man, a cheerful camp-follower, a trustworthy, loyal, and attentive soldier; **proud of the confidence reposed in him, quick to learn new things, and wonderfully bright and intelligent.**”<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Islamic Horn # 15, 1985, An Arbor, MI.

<sup>3</sup> . Seventeen Trips through Somaliland, P# 246, London 1903.

Richard Burton, who also traveled through Somaliland in 1894, said about the Somalis: “Every freeborn man holds himself equal to his ruler, and allows no royalties or prerogatives to abridge his birthright of liberty. ... soft, merry, affectionate soul, they pass without and apparent transition into a state of furry”<sup>4</sup>

*“The harsh realities of existence are mitigated by the Somali love of poetry, music, humor, and excellent speech, which are arts in which he excels”*  
*David Shank, Mennonite presence in Somalia #39, 1972.*

## **Social Structure**

The lineage system of the Somali people is composite and complicated. Somali family makeup starts from single family, and it extends to sub-clan, clan, and tribe. In Somali culture, children take their fathers’, grandfathers’, great grandfathers’, and their entire forefather’s names, which sometimes go back up to 25 generations. In Somali culture, children memorize the names of their ancestors; every Somali knows who he or she is, to which kinship or sub-clan they belong to, and who their extended ancestors are, and how they are related to each other.

## **Family**

- ✪ Family is the most important part of the Somali culture. It is the center of the universe, source of pride, power and protection. In Somali culture, family provides its members identity, security, and strong social network. Somali family relationship is based on kindness, respect and support; children respect parents, parents are kind to children, young people respect older people, family members support each other.

## **Children**

- ✪ Children are highly valued in the Somali culture and they are seen as endowment from God. Many Somali parents see their children as “wealth of the family” and their “future pension plan”. Somali children are brought up to be self-reliant, obedient, and to be kind and helpful to their parents. In Somali culture many Somali parents rely on their children to take care of them when they get old and are no longer able to take care of themselves.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Burton: First Foot Steps in East Africa # 123, London 1894.

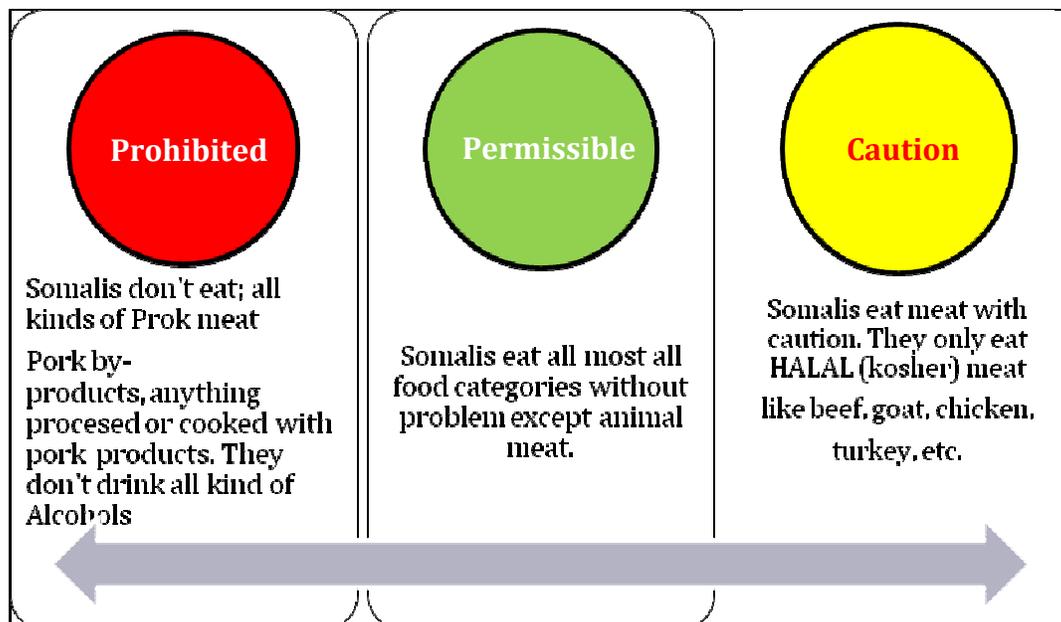
## **Culture & Region**

Unlike most other Africans, Somalis are homogeneous people in terms of ethnicity, religion, culture and language. Somalis are one hundred percent (100%) Muslim, they all speak Somali, and their culture is generally based on Islamic teachings and principles. Islam plays very important role in Somalis' way of life; the way most Somalis dress, the food they eat, and the way they raise their children are all based on Islamic principals and values.

## **Food**

Food is the number one barrier that prevents Somalis to participate many public activities and programs. Most Somalis are very committed to follow Islamic food guidelines, which strictly prohibits, among other things; eating pork and pork by-products, and any animal meat that doesn't meet Animal Slaughter Standards in the Islamic law. Though the majority of food categories (all kinds of sea food, diary products, grains, fruits and vegetables) are permissible for Muslims to eat, Somalis are very cautious when it comes to eating meat. Somalis don't eat pork and pork by-products, most of them only eat Halal (Kosher) meat. The majority of Somalis also don't drink alcohol because Islam prohibits Muslims to drink it.

### ***SOMALI FOOD CONSUMPTION GUIDELINES***



## History

- ✪ Because of its strategic location, the Somali territory has since the earliest historic times been contested by regional powers and overseas empires. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Somali territory was vigorously cut up, and divided up between colonial powers; British, Italy, France and Ethiopia. After a long and relentless struggle, the former colonies of British and Italian Somaliland achieved independence in 1960, and became what is presently known as Somali Republic. The former French Somaliland got its independence in 1977, and became the republic of Djibouti. The other two regions namely Northern Frontier District in Kenya (NFD), and Western Somalia (Ogaden) region in Ethiopia are annexed by Kenya and Ethiopia.

*“Of all the problems created or left unsolved by colonial rule in Africa, none is as potentially dangerous as that of Somali division in the east of the continent. From the Horn of Africa itself to the west stretch the Somali people, most of them today in the Somali republic, some of them French Somaliland, some in Kenya’s Northern District, some in the eastern regions of Ethiopia, and nearly all of them passionately loyal to a united Somali nation”*

*African Profile, p 154, Ronald Segal Penguin Books, 1962.*

When Somalia became independent in 1960, the country was ruled by civilian governments for the first nine years. The civilian governments were led respectively by Adan Abdulla Osman and Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke. President Sharmarke was assassinated in October, 1969. Aand few days later, a military coup overthrew the civilian government, and they were ruling the country over 21 years.

## Current Situation in Somalia

- ✪ In the late 70’s, opposition forces started to challenge the government militarily. By the end of December 1990, the battle between the government forces and its opposition entered a new level. The two armies fought in the capital, Mogadishu. By that time, a large part of the country was already outside the control of central authority. Finally, in January 1991, the government forces were defeated and the president of the country-General Mohamed Siad Barre- was forced to leave the capital. But the victorious opposition forces could not agree to form a national government.

- ✪ A power struggle started and opposite factions fought in the capital consequently the Somali state collapsed. Several armed factions were formed but none was able to win over the others. That was the beginning of a Somali civil war which continued for many years. This war caused a large exodus of refugees to the outside world.
  
- ✪ In May 1991, Somalia' Northern regions (British Somaliland) seceded from the rest of the Somali Republic. They called themselves "Somaliland". In August, 1998, traditional leaders and local authorities in the North-eastern region set up the semi-autonomous administration called "Puntland State of Somalia". In April, 2002, the traditional and the faction leaders based in Baidoa announced the formation of a "South-western State of Somalia"<sup>5</sup>.
  
- ✪ Two years of reconciliation conference held in Kenya and brought together all the warlords resulted in the formation of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The TFG met stiff opposition from the majority of the Somali people as well as they divided in between themselves. In order to defeat the opposition and stretch its power to the whole country, the Government invited the Ethiopian troops in to the country to help the TFG stretch its rule to the country. The Somali people opposed the Ethiopians army with stiff resistance. Ethiopia is the traditional enemy of the Somali people because it is already colonizing a large Somali territory and it claims the rest of the country.
  
- ✪ Large-scale fighting since late December 2006 between the Somalia Transitional Federal Government (TFG), Ethiopian forces, and militias associated with the Council of Islamic Courts (CIC) has led to a further deterioration in humanitarian conditions. As a result, approximately 335,000 Somali refugees have fled the country, and approximately one million people have been displaced within Somalia"<sup>6</sup>.
  
- ✪ "The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that widespread violence, endemic poverty, and recurrent droughts and floods have generated a complex emergency in Somalia since 1991. Continued civil strife and inter-clan conflicts have complicated the humanitarian situation and limited access to affected areas.

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<sup>5</sup> . The United Nations in Somalia; unsomalia.net.

<sup>6</sup> . ReliefWeb (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA))

## **Somalis in Canada**

- ✪ As many studies indicate, the history of Somalis in Canada goes back to the late 1970s'. According to Multicultural Canada, however, before the late 1980s, the number of Somalis in Canada was insignificant, consisting of a very small number of immigrants, students, and political exiles. The political strife in Somalia greatly increased migration and the flight of refugees, so that Somalia was the source of the second-largest number of refugee claimants in Canada in 1991 and 1993. In 1989 the acceptance rate of Somali refugees was 95 percent, and this led to an expedited process in 1990<sup>7</sup>.

## **Somali Community in Edmonton**

The Somali community presence in Edmonton goes back to the early 80's, when a number of Somali students and political exiles came to Edmonton. The real community settlement, however, started when Canada opened its doors for the Somali refugees fleeing from the Somali civil war in early 90s. By 1994-1995, a significant number of the Somali Families (estimated around 250 to 300 families) were living in Edmonton, though the majority of those families later moved to Ontario. Alberta's current economic boom attracted a significant number of Somali families to move into Edmonton.

Somalis who came to Edmonton in the early 90s laid a strong foundation for the community, by creating a community spirit based on natural help and mutual support. The Somali community in Edmonton is a caring community, where the community members help and support each other. Community members share information, and give the needy ones both social and financial help. Without the traditional kinship and the natural generosity of the Somali people, it would have been very difficult for many Somali families to easily settle in Edmonton.

## **ABOUT THE PROJECT**

There is no accurate data about the size of the Somali-Canadian community in Edmonton, but the estimate current Somali population is around 10-12,000 people. A preliminary mapping of Somali community in Edmonton was conducted in

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<sup>7</sup>. Multicultural Canada Website

between July and September of 2006 by group of Somali professionals. The purpose of the mapping was to estimate the size of the community and to indicate the major areas in the city where they reside. The result of that initial mapping highlighted the need to conduct an in-depth needs assessment.

## **The Purpose**

The Needs Assessment Research for the Somali Community in Edmonton was funded by Community Partnership Enhancement Fund (CPEF) with the aim to examine the needs, strengths, and priorities of Somali families, youth and children in Edmonton. The aim research is;

- ✪ To highlight the barriers, challenges and priorities face by Somali community in general, and particularly by women and children in their resettlement experience in Edmonton.
- ✪ To create a basic information resource and educational tool about the Somalis in Edmonton, for the different levels of Canadian governments, community organizations, natural helpers, and immigrant service providing agencies. This information tool will help them develop, plan and implement more relevant programs, resources and strategies for the community.

## **Main Goals**

- ✪ To make the Somali community in Edmonton more visible; by presenting the culture, history, heritage, values, strengths as well as their aspirations
- ✪ To identify the needs and the challenges faced by Somali families and youth in their daily life, and to propose solutions to those challenges
- ✪ To establish cross-cultural relations and better understanding between the Somali community, government authorities, mainstream organizations and agencies. It is hoped that such a relationship will lay the foundation for on-going collaboration to improve the well being of Somali children, youth and families in Edmonton.
- ✪ To support mainstream service-providing agencies improve services for Somali families and youth. This would hopefully give the Somali community an opportunity get to an appropriate services, and meaningful support.

## **Intended Results**

- ✪ Establish strong relationship and better understanding between partner organizations/ agencies and the Somali community. This will provide the foundation for on-going actions and reflections to improve the well being of Somali people in Edmonton.
  
- ✪ Meaningful information will be gathered about Somali community, this will help mainstream service providers to gain more knowledge regarding how to support Somali community in meaningful ways. It will also give Somali Community an improved access to services and resources available.
  
- ✪ To create a broader and greater awareness of the issues, priorities & hopes of the Somali community in Edmonton.

## **Methodology;**

The Needs Assessment Research project for Somali Community was conducted as a collaborative project. It was carried out using the following approaches: Literature review, one-on-one interviews with key informants, focus group discussions and survey questionnaire. The first three months was the preparatory and design phase.

The project partners (ASAAS, SCERDO, and Community Partnership Enhancement Fund, Edmonton and Area Children Services, City of Edmonton, Edmonton Public Schools, Multicultural Health Brokers Co-op) set up the modalities in which to conduct of the research. A bilingual survey (English and Somali) questionnaire was developed and approved by the partners.

## **Survey Questionnaire**

The first step was recruiting and training key community member volunteers. The ASAAS and SCERDO professionals identified and recruited four Somali women who are very knowledgeable about the community, and have very good connection with the other Somali women in the community. The volunteers were trained. The purpose and the usefulness of the project were explained to them.

The SCERDO/ASAAS professional and other four volunteers started to fill out the questionnaire from the families in their homes and other individuals in the city.

Before we started to interview the respondents, we asked if they filled this questionnaire before. If the answer is “yes” then we do not proceed further. This way we were able to avoid having the same family complete the questionnaire twice.

## **Literature review**

A literature survey was completed by searching relevant books and articles available through various sources such as Edmonton Public Libraries, Colleges & University of Alberta, as well as local organizations and Government departments. In addition, insightful members of the Somali communities in Edmonton and elsewhere were contacted by telephone for additional information regarding relevant literature about the Somalis.

## **One-on-one interviews**

Interviews were held with 130 key informants. These included Somali community leaders, Somali elders, women, youth, professionals, community workers, religious leaders and teachers. A set of open-ended questions and questionnaire items were developed and used to gather input and comments. A sample of the questionnaire is attached to this final report.

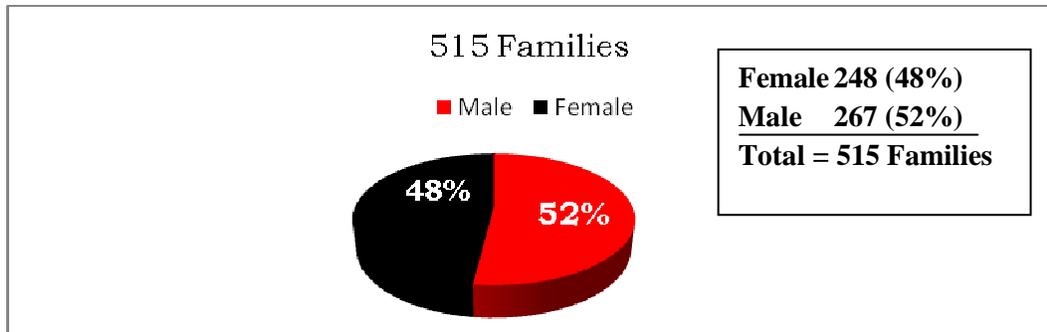
## **Focus group discussions**

Four focus group discussions were held. Participants in the first meeting included representatives from the Somali community elders, intellectuals and well respected individuals. The second focus group involved members of the Somali women in Edmonton. The third focus group was Somali youth, and the fourth focus group was Somali professionals.

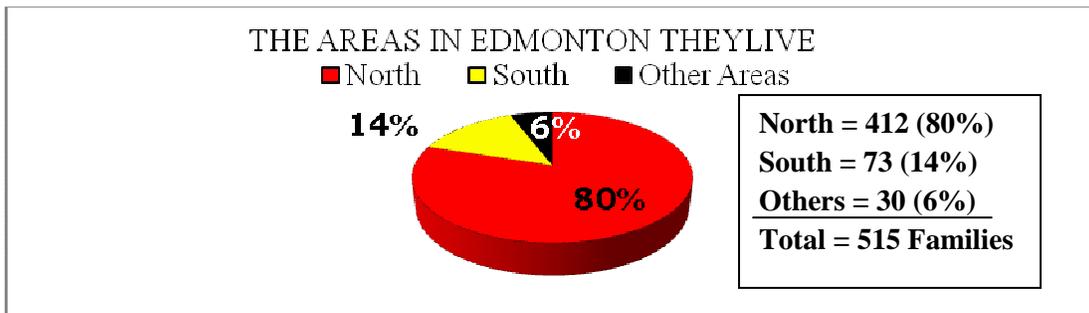
## **SURVEY FINDINGS**

### **Arrival & Settlement**

A survey was conducted between January 2007 and August 2007 with 515 Somali families in Edmonton. Of those surveyed, 48% (248) were female, and 52% (267) were male. The respondents of the survey were adult, and spoke on behalf of a total of 2541 individuals (in their families). Amongst them were 1677 children.

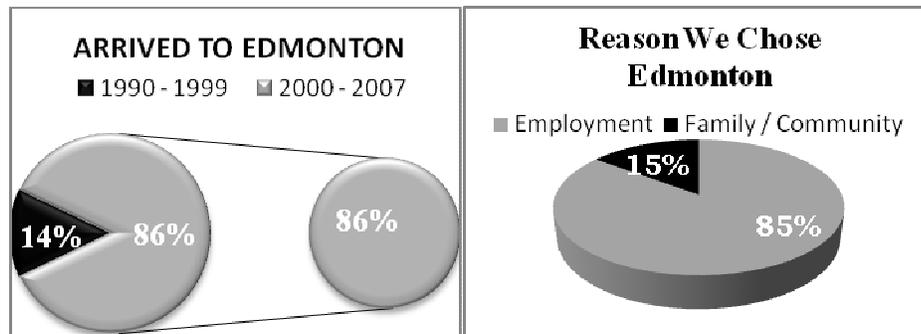


Among the families surveyed, 442 (86%) came to Edmonton between 2000 and 2007. The majority of the surveyed families 80% (412 families) live in the North side of the city, 14% (73 families) live in the South side of the City, and 6% (30 families) live in other areas of the City.



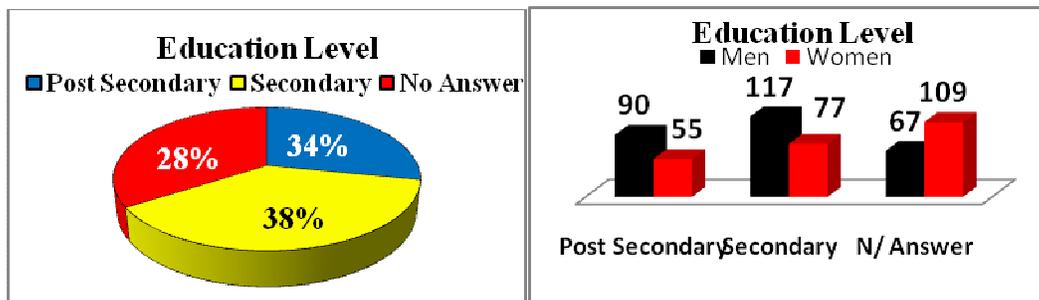
According to the survey, a majority (83%) of the respondents are Canadian citizens, while only 15% of them are permanent residents, with the remaining 6% being refugee claimants.

Overwhelming majority (86%) of the surveyed families came to Edmonton between 2000 and 2007, and most of them moved from other parts of the country, such as Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia. Employment and career opportunities are the two main reasons that Somali moved to Edmonton. Eight-five percent (85%) of the surveyed families (439 families) came to Edmonton for employment, 15% come to join their families or because of the presence of a Somali community.



**Education Level;**

The research indicates that 38% (194 respondents) finished secondary level of education, 34% have post secondary level of education, and the other 28% did not answer the question. Of those who have completed secondary level of education, 66% of them are men, 34% are women. Of those who have post secondary level of education 74% are men, 36% are women.



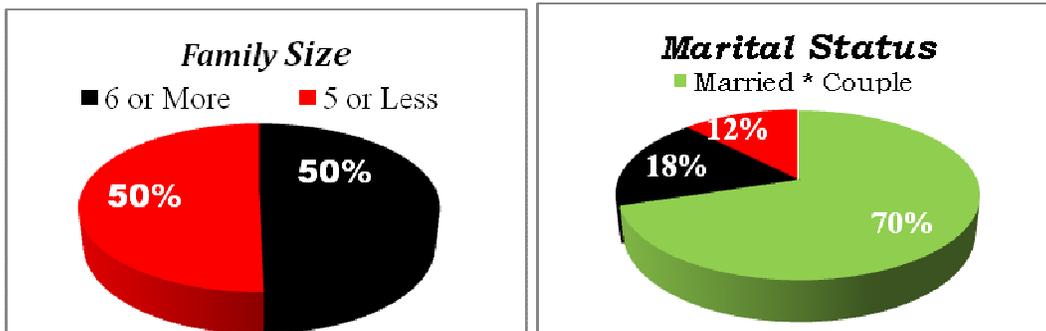
## **Employment**

The survey indicates that the majority (71%) of the respondents is employed, however, interviews show that a majority of the Somali professionals have not yet a job that relate to their profession, so that a lot of Somali qualified people are still underemployed. Most Somali men work long hours (14 -16 hrs a day) in order to feed their families, and most do not have vacations or other benefits. Somali community members in Edmonton are yet to benefit from Alberta’s economic boom; and according to the respondent, they remain in “survival mode”.

Despite having Canadian credentials and/or equivalent foreign training and qualifications, the majority of Somali professionals are unable to obtain meaningful employment that relate to their trained field. Only a few Somali male professionals and trades people are employed in their chosen fields. An overwhelming majority are driving taxis or trucks. Similarly, the majority of Somali female professionals are doing cleaning and housekeeping jobs. As a result, many Somali professionals have become deeply frustrated, hopeless and many are depressed. Research shows that the Somali people in Edmonton are struggling through the first stages of settlement and integration. Many Somali families are in “survival mode”. Specifically, the issues of underemployment/unemployment and poverty continue to affect a high number of Somali families in Edmonton. The survey indicated that underemployment is among the top-ranking problem encountered by Somalis in Edmonton.

## **About Families & Children**

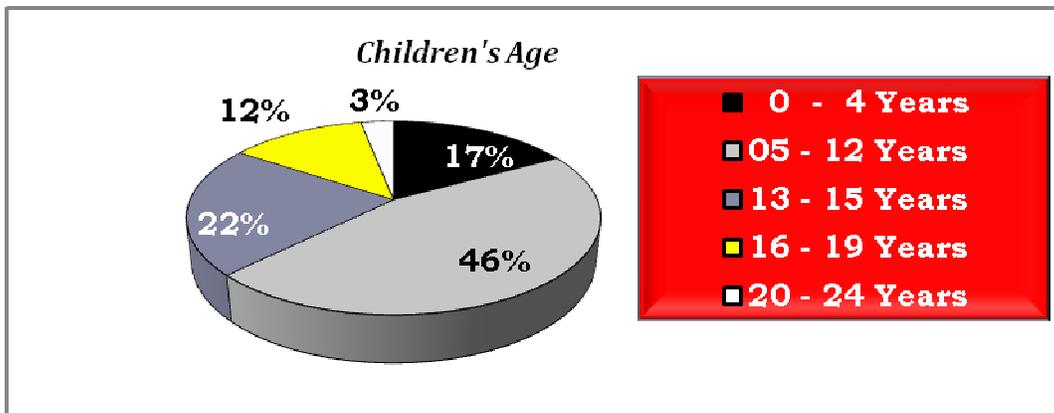
The average size of the Somali family is larger than the average Canadian family. 50% (216 of families surveyed are comprised of six or more family members. The other 50% (216) surveyed have five or less family members. The majority of the 515 families surveyed (70%) are married, 18% of them said they are single parents, and the other 12% did not indicate marital status.



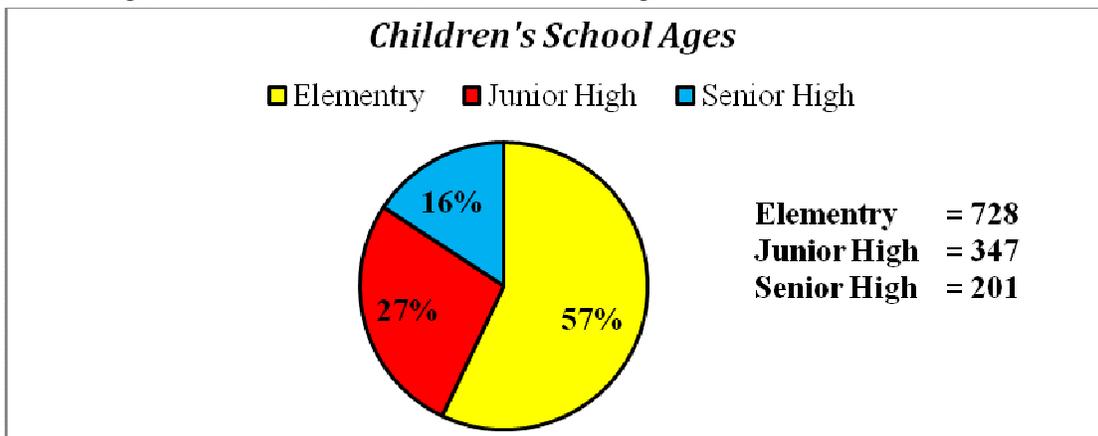
\*Although the study shows that eighteen percent (18%) of the families surveyed are single parents, this number, however, does not truly reflect the actual number of single parents who are raising children in Edmonton. For instance, there are many Somali fathers who work outside of Edmonton, and are often away from home for a long period of time, and the mothers of these families who are raising children alone typically go through the same struggle that the single parents go through.

### **About Children's age**

Research indicates that 60% (1,677) of 2,541 Somali individuals involved in the survey are children and youth. The children's' ages are as flows; 17% (271) of those 1,677 children are between the ages of 0-4 years, 46% (512) of them are between the ages of 5-12 years, 22% (347) are between 13-15 years old, 1% (201) are between 16-19 years old, and 3% (49) are between 20-24 years old.



The research also shows that the majority (57% or 728 child) of those 1677 Somali kids in the survey, are in elementary school. Twenty-seven (27% or 347 ) are Junior High, while 16% ( or 201) are in Senior High level.



## **What Community said about the challenges they face**

Through survey questionnaire, interviews and group discussions, we asked community members to discuss the needs of the community, and to identify the main challenges, priorities and issues face by the Somali families, youth and children in Edmonton. Despite their age, gender, and education level differences, the participants' main concerns and ideas about the community needs, challenges and priorities were very much the same. Here is summary of what we heard from the community;

### **Education**

- ✪ Somali families are aware that the Edmonton Public Education System is one of the best in the country and they are very grateful to the school officials, teachers, and school staff. Many Somalis, however, feel that Somali students in Edmonton public schools are disadvantaged. Many Somali parents are worried that many Somali children in Edmonton public schools may not be fully benefiting from the education that available for them
- ✪ The current relationship between the Somali parents and the Edmonton Public Schools authorities is very limited. When Somali families were asked about their experience in terms of their relationship with the Edmonton public schools, the vast majority (90% or 463) of those 515 families surveyed indicated a lack of communication and misunderstanding as the key barriers that Somali parents and their children face.
- ✪ Many Somalis believe that some school officials may not understand the social and the cultural context of the Somali students in Edmonton public schools. For instance, many Somali parent said that school authorities don't seem to take their children's social and cultural background into account when they are dealing with Somali students. Many Somali parents also shared concerns that some Somali students are quickly labeled with having "behavioral and cognitive problems".
- ✪ Because of the cultural, language, and other barriers that exist, many Somali parents indicated that they are not happy with school administration.

- ✪ When asked how satisfied they are with the schools that their children are going to, the majority (73% or 374 families) of 515 families surveyed did not answer that question directly. Instead, they listed the challenges and the barriers that Somali children face in Edmonton public schools.
- ✪ Even of those 141 families who answered that question, only 63% (or 89 families) of them said they are satisfied with the schools, while 37% (or 52 families) said they are unsatisfied. Somali parents also worry about that some teachers and school officials may have negative perceptions about Somalis. Here is an example some of the comments we heard from the parents:

*“I never go to the school (my children go) to see the teachers or to talk to them about my children. So the teachers think (that) I don’t care about my children. But I don’t go (to the school) because I don’t understand them”*
- ✪ In General, many Somalis in Edmonton feel that Somali students are disadvantaged in the educational system. The parents believe that Somali children’s education and cultural background has not been taken into account when placement decisions are made. They are concerned that Somali students are quickly labeled as having behavioral problems (such as hyperactivity, and other conditions such as Attention Deficit disorder).
- ✪ Many Somali parents feel that school administration may hastily recommend cognitive assessment when children are not academically progressing. They also think that some teachers and school officials have failed to consider whether the lack of progress may come from other sources, such as illiteracy, social problems, etc.

## **Youth**

Many Somali community members (collectively and individually) indicated that Somali youth in Edmonton are in real danger, and they need an immediate attention. When community asked about the challenges and issues face by Somali youth, they said; youth violence, drugs, bullying, school dropouts, and criminal activities are the some of the major issues facing Somali youth. The following is summarized comments from the community members;

- ✪ “The youth in our community are suffering in many ways. They suffer physically, intellectually and emotionally, in the schools, in the city,, in their beers, in their homes, and in the public. We came to Alberta to get better future for our children; unfortunately it seems that it works on the other way around.
- ✪ We are helplessly watching our young children losing their culture, their language, their future, their hope, and most importantly their lives. The young Somalis who violently lost their lives here in Edmonton, were in need of help, understanding and meaningful support. Since many of the Somali youth don’t get the social and education support they need, they became prey for criminal gangs and drug dealers. Hundreds of our young Somalis, who were suppose to be finishing high school, or going to Colleges and Universities, sadly ended up in Alberta jails.
- ✪ The Somali parents (especially mothers) are working hard to channel our youth on the right path and to give them a sense of hope. But the kind of support Somali youth need is beyond our capacity. We need all the levels of governments to help us help and save our children and youth”

### ***What youth said about their challenges***

When we asked the Somali youth about the key challenges they face, many of them said; misperception, negative stereotypes about Somali youth, discrimination, and lack of support.

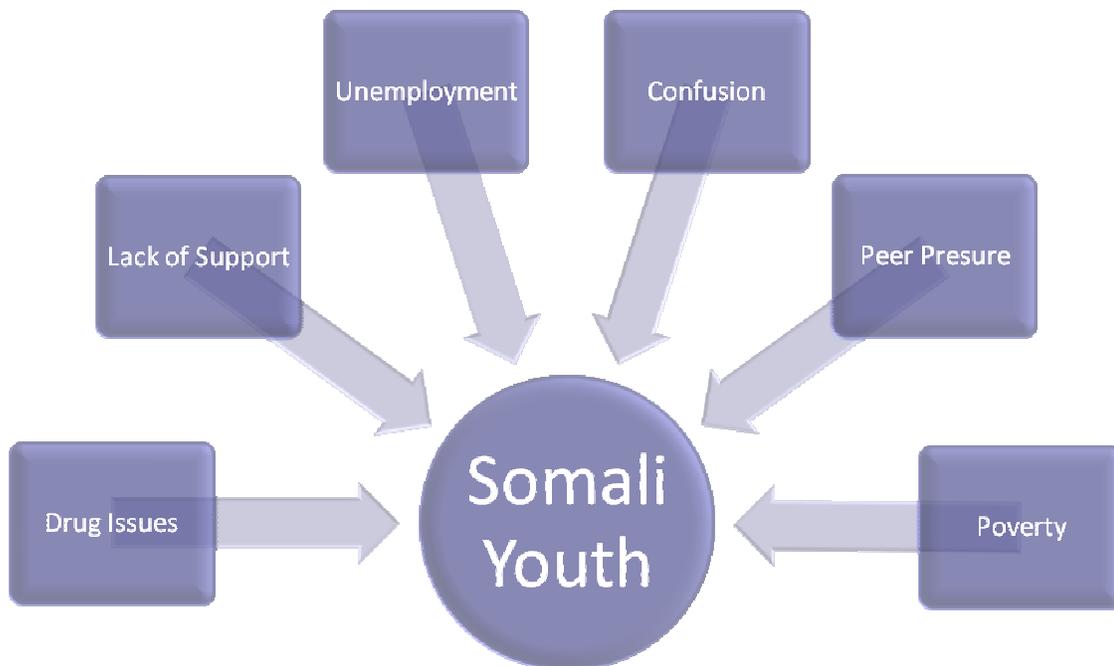
Many youth in our community believe that no body in the world (parents, elders, and teachers) would understand them. They said Somali parents and community leaders have no clue the kind of challenges that we are going through; in school, at home, and in the public. For instance, a grade 10<sup>th</sup> girl wrote about some of the challenges Somali students face in Edmonton public Schools;

*“As Somalis, our nature is to be loud and outgoing, and I don’t believe people understand or accept that about us. People assume that when we’re in a big group, or if its just a bunch of friends hanging out that we are the cause of all problems just because of the color of our skin. Its kind of ridiculous to be honest, because if it was another race, it wouldn’t be a problem. So we’re treated like criminals because teachers are always keeping an eye on us”.* Another grade 12<sup>th</sup> student wrote; *“Councilors and assistant principles assume that Somali students are all losers and careless, they bring Somali students down, and they take away from them an encouragement and hope”*

These are the key barriers that Somali youth face

- ✪ ***Lack of support:*** Somali youth are lacking support both in school and outside school. There are no culturally appropriate social programs that they can participate in their spare time. Somali students don’t get academic support (homework, in-school programs, tutoring etc). For instance, many Somali students are struggling with studies, some times they may need little help or advice, but since many Somali parents don’t understand education system in general, and particularly high school system, they may not be able to give their children the little help they need, and as a result, many students dropped out from school.
- ✪ ***Lack of proper counseling:*** Many community members believe that Somali youth and children don’t get proper counseling at schools. The majority of school counselors don’t understand the needs, challenges, and cultural background of the Somali youth. Somali youth are culturally and socially different from the mainstream youth. They are also facing various challenges and issues including poverty, poor academic achievements, negative stereotypes, discrimination, identity crisis, low self-esteem, culture conflicts and behavior problems. For example, many young Somali students, who are struggling in school don’t know what other options are available for them such as trades skills, academic up-grading, etc.

- ✪ **Unemployment:** There are many young Somalis who are staying home; they neither work nor they go to school. Some of them they finished high school with low grade marks that don't qualify them for college or university, while others dropped-out before they finish high school. These young Somalis also don't get meaningful employment because they lack of skills and training and as a result, they easily become susceptible to other undesirable activities
- ✪ **Drug issues:** many people in the community suspect that drug is number one cause of Somali youth violence and other criminal activities. On the other hand, many Somali parents don't know any thing about drug issues; the kinds of drugs available in the market, the effects drugs can have on their children if their children use drug, or what to do if they find them out involving in drugs.



## **Challenges face by women**

The settlement experience of the Somali women and children in Edmonton has been very challenging. Somali mothers (regardless of their marital status) carry out the entire burden in raising children; they are mothers, teachers, main care givers, and often bread winners of their families.

There are two types of single mothers in our community who are single-handedly struggling to raise their children and youth. There are those real single mothers (widowed or divorced) who are trying to raise and support their children by themselves. There are also those mothers whose husbands are not available to help them because they may be working outside of the city, or may be out of the country and/or simply they may be working in 16 hrs a day in order to sustain the family. In either these three above mentioned cases, the mother is the only parent who is available for the children.

**Somali mothers are physically, emotionally, and financially exhausted. They are physically worn out because of the difficulty task of family and children's responsibility. They are mentally exhausted because of constant fear and anxiety about the safety and the wellbeing of their children and youth (to be safe from violence, drug, and other criminal activities, and to succeed in their education). They are financially exhausted because of increasing family needs, poverty, and limited financial resources.**

For instance, to get an idea about the typical daily life experience of the majority of the Somali mothers in Edmonton. Imagine a single mother of 6 children aged between 3 to 17 years old. She may be in a poor living condition where her family (of seven) may be living in 2 bedrooms apartment. The routine daily life of that mother would be 16 to 18 hrs of work every day. She don't get a day off, don't have leisure activities, and she may not even go out for weeks. This may sound as hypothetical scenario, but it is the factual life experience for many Somali women and children in Edmonton.

One of the Somali women volunteers who took part conducting this research wrote; “In order to get fair and clear understanding of the issues and the challenges face by Somali women and children, I had many opportunities to interview and have an open-ended discussions with Somali women. Many of the women that I have talked to indicated that, the most challenging issue that our community faces is a growing number of single mother that raising children by themselves. This is a huge problem because they said:

- ✪ Single mothers would have to work twice as hard as a married couple in order to financially support their family and raise their children.
- ✪ Because they work fulltime so that they don’t get enough time to stay home with their children; to teach, guide, and discipline them
- ✪ Many of those single mothers don’t have education back ground and they don’t speak English, so even if they get time, they can’t help their children with theirs home-works.

These are common problems Face by Somali Women

- ✪ ***Poor health and living conditions:*** Many Somali women are so busy with many aspects of household issues. As we mentioned before, they are the bread winners, care takers and the upbringing of their kids. Their time for healthy/wellness activities is very limited. Furthermore, even if they get a chance for healthy activities, there are no sport facilities appropriate for their cultural demand. Since, most of the Somalis are live in the category on the poverty/below the poverty line, most of the foods that they consume are not appropriately balanced. While the majority of Somali families live in overcrowded homes, Somali mothers are in nerve-racking conditions.
- ✪ They don’t get enough rest or sleep and they constantly worry about the well-being of their children. According to the findings of this research, however, because of the poor living situations, the health conditions of many Somali women are vehemently below the Canadian health standard.

*They worry when their children are at home because they fear their children’s natural loud noise may cause them problem with neighbors. They also worry when their kids at school, or if they are playing outside, because they worry their children may get into trouble. This dire situation that Somali women are living in, has negative impact on*

*both mothers' and children's well-being.*

- ❖ **Limited of social programs:** Most of the programs that are intended to help families and children are either not accessible to the majority of the Somali women and children due to existing barriers including lack awareness and networking, transportation and baby-sitting, or they are not culturally appropriate for them.

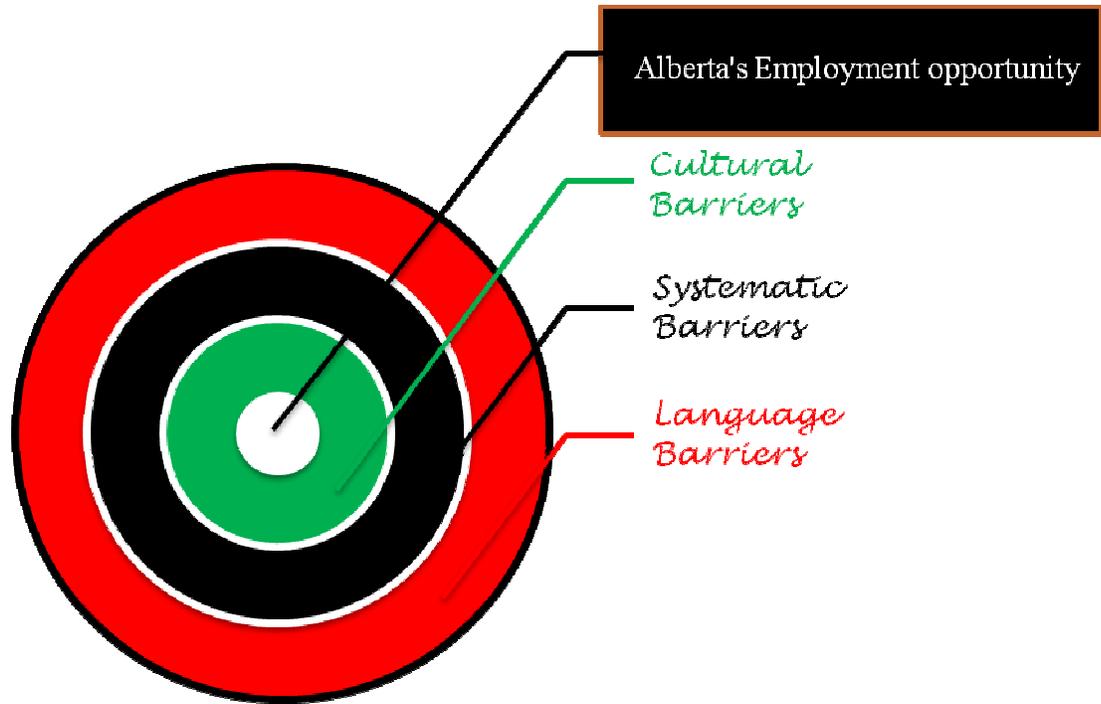
*Cultural barriers are one of the main obstacles that prevent Somali women to participate family support programs and activities. For example, children and youth drop off centers are one of the most important services need by Somali mothers. However, most Somali parents don't use mainstream drop off centers, because, they are very cautious about the kind of food (if any) their children may eat at these centers. Somali parents are also very sensitive about their culture and religion for that reason, they don't participate well the programs and the activities that are not culturally suitable for them.*

## **Employment**

Employment barriers face Somalis include such as lack of Canadian work experience, lack of information and networking, lack of access to professional licensing due to lack of recognition of their foreign credential as well as lack of English language proficiency. The majority of Somalis have limited knowledge of the job market in Edmonton, and getting a job in one's own field is particularly difficult. Only a few Somali professionals and trades people are employed in their chosen fields.

Almost overwhelming majority of Somali professionals who have completed different levels of university degrees from abroad and here in Canada are either taxi or truck drivers.

A small number professionals are working in their trained field while others are working in other industries or/and running their own small business. In this regard, many Somali professionals have become frustrated and felt hopelessness. Most Somalis professionals who are underemployed or unemployed felt that these employment barriers are due to limited practical government policy, unnecessary restriction and impediments from Canadian professional associations and lack appropriate networking and connections. Moreover, because of family responsibilities here in Canada and back home, a lot of professionals have to accept any job that available for them to allow paying their household needs.



### **One Million Dollar Question!**

- Q: Alberta extremely needs professionals/workforce. Somalis desperately need employment. Albert’s employers can’t find trained workers to hire; Somali professionals can’t find employment that suits their profession, what is the problem? And what is the solution?
- S
- © A: Above mentioned barriers hinder Somali professionals to benefit from the Alberta’s employment opportunity. Let’s work together to eliminate these invisible barriers, one at the time; Partnership Break Barriers!

**Resilience:** Somalis are very resilient people by nature, and the traumatic experiences they have gone through past 20 years made them even stronger. “The experiences of Somali refugees, before their resettlement in Canada, included forced flight from their homes, persecution, murder, physical assault, and starvation. However, those hardships did not hinder from them to start a new flourishing life here in Canada. Although they are still struggling with their resettlement, on the other hand, they are visibly and vibrantly contributing the Canadian mosaic culture, the economy and the other developmental aspect .They also contributing well being of their families here in Canada and their country of origin.

*“Somalia's resiliency has been enhanced by a wide-ranging kinship system that facilitates personal contacts and strategic relationship” 8*

## **Contributions**

*“Somali Immigrants add vibrancy, culture to once downtrodden (Alberta Avenue) area”. Edmonton Journal, July 22, 2006, Edmonton.*

Although the majority of Somalis moved to Edmonton after 2002, their contribution has already been felt in the City. According to an Edmonton Journal article, the Somali businesses in Alberta Avenue have contributed the revitalization of the neighborhood.

*“their presence has been a welcome boost to the community in every way, the opening of their businesses has helped greatly in the area by bringing more customers”.*

- ★ Somali business community in Edmonton is growing very fast. In 2003 there had been only two Somali restaurants and one grocery store in Edmonton. Today, there are more than 50 Somali businesses in Edmonton, and in since 2006, more than fifteen Somali-owned businesses were opened in the City. Among other businesses, there are eight Somali restaurants, six grocery stores, ten clothing stores, two coffee shops, and a number of business offices.

## **Aspiration:**

Somalis community in Edmonton endeavor to be visible in every aspects of the social, civic and economic life of Edmontonians.

During the research interview, group discussions and survey questionnaires, following aspirations were raised and documented.

- ★ The Somalis aspire an education system, free from cultural biases, discrimination and stereotyping.
- ★ Community hopes that Somali parents to be more involved in the education of their children and have close relationship with school and teachers. Parents are expected to be more involved in the volunteer activities and policy making bodies of the Education system
- ★ The community hopes a very low drop-outs and higher academic achievement among the Somali children. They also want to see more students enroll in the post-secondary education, trades and apprenticeship programs.

- ✪ They also strive to see more qualified teachers/counselor in the Edmonton public schools as well as colleges and universities
- ✪ Community hope to have their own youth center equipped with sport facilities
- ✪ They foresee Somali youth free from drug use and gang activities. This can be achieved through social programs and sport activities
- ✪ Community hopes to see more Somali youth workers and counselors
- ✪ They hope real connection among youth in the post-secondary education and high schools (youth to youth role modeling)
- ✪ More Youth action programs for fostering multiculturalism, leadership and community growth
- ✪ The Somalis strive to witness strong bound among the members of each family and in between the families
- ✪ Community wishes to see that fathers and mothers equally participate the upbringing and the education of their children. The presence of the father in the family is very crucial and life saving for raising of the children specially boys.
- ✪ Community expects the father and mother to be a positive role model for their children as well the whole community
- ✪ Community wishes to see many Somali professionals join in the Canadian labour market for their trained field.
  
- ✪ Community expects from the different levels of governments to hire Somali professionals and skilled workers. Also community expects the leaders of the community to be involved in the political life of the different levels of Canadian government.
- ✪ Community members hope that Somali parents, especially fathers to take leading role in guiding, and helping Somali children and youth.
- ✪ Community expressed dissatisfaction about the Somali community organizations efforts, and in particularly their lack of cooperation to serve the community better. Many community members hope in the near future to see one strong, effective and functional Somali community organization.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

After we did an extensive information analysis and community consultations, it became very clear that Somali community in Edmonton face many barriers and challenges that need a coordinated efforts in order to tackle. Therefore, the researchers are proposing the following recommendations;

### **Education**

- 1.** The research indicated that there is a high degree of dissatisfaction among the Somalis towards the Edmonton schools. In order to win the hearts and trust of the Somalis toward the Edmonton schools, coordinated efforts

between the Somali community leaders, school administrations and Edmonton School Board, are recommended.

- 2.** The research shows that many parents question about hasty referral of the high number of Somali kids to cognitive assessment and the special needs program. When teachers see student is not academically progressing in class, many of them easily refer to cognitive assessment without making sure that whether the lack of progress is coming from the learning ability of the kid or from her/his cognitive capability. Researchers recommend to the Edmonton Public School Board to come up with directives and clear policies that addresses to this above mentioned issue.
- 3.** The Edmonton School Board is asked to consider putting in place cultural sensitivity training program for both staff and teachers so that they are more able to understand and appreciate the different cultural and religion background of the students.
- 4.** There should be collective effort to establish good communication between school authorities and the Somali Community, especially Somali parents. This will help both the community and the school authorities to understand and work together toward improving the quality of education for Somali students in Edmonton public schools.
- 5.** Mentoring and tutoring program is recommended for those Somali students who are experiencing academic problems. This could include hiring in-school Somali counselors and teachers. This will give the Somali students and their families a chance to cope with the difficulties they are facing in their education and in schools.

### **Parental Support**

Somali community organizations and Edmonton Public Schools need to work together to come up a practical strategy to reach out and educate Somali parents about the education system in Edmonton, and the role the Somali parents can play in the education of their children

- 1.** Existing educational Parental support programs and resource materials should be translated into Somali language for the Somali parents, so they may become more aware about how the Edmonton education system works (school policies, parents' rights and responsibilities)

- 2.** Somali community organizations and Edmonton school board should work together developing (practical and easy to follow) parental support programs specifically designed for Somali parents who have limited English language skills to be able to help their children with school-work.
- 3.** Any support programs intended to Somali parents should be more sensitive to the cultural and religious beliefs of the Somali parents and students.
- 4.** Somali community should organize; volunteer Somali parents in every school where high numbers of Somali students attend. The main goal of the “Volunteer Somali Parents” should be to advocate and encourage other Somali parents to be more involved in children’s education. They should also work very closely with school official, board of education, and Somali community organizations.
- 5.** Somali Parents should be encouraged and supported to learn the English language. This will decrease the misunderstanding and miscommunication between parents, children and school. Parent’s higher level of English fluency will raise the self esteem of the children, and enhance parents’ communication with teachers.

### **Families’ and Children’s Support**

- 1.** The research strongly recommends that Edmonton and Area Family and Children’s Services should translate resource information about their programs, services and policies into the Somali language. This will help Somali parents be more aware about these programs as well as their rights and responsibilities.
- 2.** The staff of the Edmonton and Area family & Children Services should be more sensitive to the religious, cultural and traditional parenting norms of the Somali community.

### **Youth Support**

Of all difficult challenges face by the Somali community in Edmonton, there are no more pressing problems than youth related issues that Somali families have to deal with. As the research indicates, the anxiety for Somali parents often begins when the school bell rings; they worry whether their children will come home safely, whether they are susceptible to drugs and crime. In order to address these issues, the research makes the following recommendations;

- 1. *After school programs;*** many Somali families live in overcrowded homes, thus, children often don't have their own rooms or even relevant space to do their studies. It will be very helpful to create after school programs and homework support system for Somali students in order to improve their academic achievements. Studies show that afterschool programs keep youth and children out of trouble, and engages them learning.
- 2. *Youth Leadership;*** Somali community organizations need to involve youth in designing and creating; an innovative and entertaining programs and activities where youth can exchange ideas and experience, and develop a sense that they are the future leaders of our community.
- 3.** In order to boost the morals and the self-esteem of the Somali teenagers; Somali parents, community leaders, respected elders should change the negative view they have about the youth with positive one. We should respect their ideas, recognize their efforts, and reward them their achievements.
- 4. *Youth Mentorship and Guidance;*** Somali scholars and academics, University/College students and other professionals should play a leading role in creating an effective mentorship programs for Somali youth and children.
- 5. *Youth Counseling;*** Edmonton Schools where high number of Somali students attend should consider hiring counselors who can understand the issues face by Somali children and youth, and the root cause of their problems.
- 6. *Youth Crime prevention;*** Somali community organizations, government authorities, and law- enforcement agencies should work together putting in place Somali youth violence prevention programs and strategies.
- 7. *Youth Employment;*** All the levels of governments should put more effort in helping young Somalis, who left school, to learn skills in order they get meaningful employment.

## **Employment**

- ✪ To establish employment resource and referral centers for Somali newcomers
- ✪ To hire more Somali professionals for federal, provincial and municipal authorities.
- ✪ To help Somali foreign-trained professionals find work that matches their educational background.
- ✪ To conduct employment workshops, seminars, career counseling and special bridging programs.
- ✪ To provide Somali business owner an ample training about the entrepreneurship and marketing skills and the rules and the regulation that governs the Canadian business and commerce sector.

**The Government authorities can provide so many programs, funds and resources, but the best programs that will work for our children are the programs designed by our community, because; Somali community knows what is right for our kids. If we want our children keep their language, culture and religion and values, the community organizations should put aside their difference, ego and interests and work together for the sake of our families and children. They should show leadership by taking concrete steps to create better programs for our children**

## **Conclusion**

Although the time-line and the resource were very limited, this research project collected the information of population sample of 515 Somali families which corresponds around 2541 individuals. The project showcased as a model for the Somali community in Edmonton. It provides background information about Somali history in general and their arrival history here in Edmonton, culture, and values. It also provides general map of the composition of typical Somali family, the size, youth and employment problems, marital status, their arrival in Edmonton, the sex ratio and the neighborhood where they live. Through questionnaire, interviews, and group discussions, the research highlights also the needs, challenges, priorities, aspirations and settlement experience of the community.

The type of barriers and challenges facing Somali communities in Edmonton is similar to those challenges faced by other immigrant communities in Canada.

But Somalis remain optimistic about their present and future in Edmonton. They are planning to adjust and build their future life in Edmonton. Their struggle to establish self-sufficient, functional and visible community in Edmonton is clear and tremendous. The Somali community in Edmonton had never chance to making their voice heard. It is imperative, therefore for Somali community in Edmonton that to express their needs and raise their voice for municipal, provincial and federal authorities in order to assure Somali community to access and receive the core funding that available for other new communities as well. We hope that this research project will profoundly highlight the needs of Somali community in Edmonton as well as generate a fundamental set of knowledge for community leaders, natural helpers, service-providing Agencies, different levels of Government of Canada to plan and develop more relevant programs, resources and strategies. During our information gathering and consultation process within the Somali community in Edmonton, we found that Somalis are highly educated people, talented, resilience, business minded, hard-workers and easily adaptable. However, limited language skills, poor socio-economic status, cultural barriers and mal-adaptation due to the new environment and lack of information and guidance negates Somali community to fully access in both mainstream and immigrant programs and resources that available them. We hope the outcome of this research help stakeholders understand the limitations, barriers and challenges Somali community in Edmonton face. Without properly addressing those above mentioned recommendations, the efforts and resource that we put aside for the implementation to this research project will be addressed inadequate and worthless

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