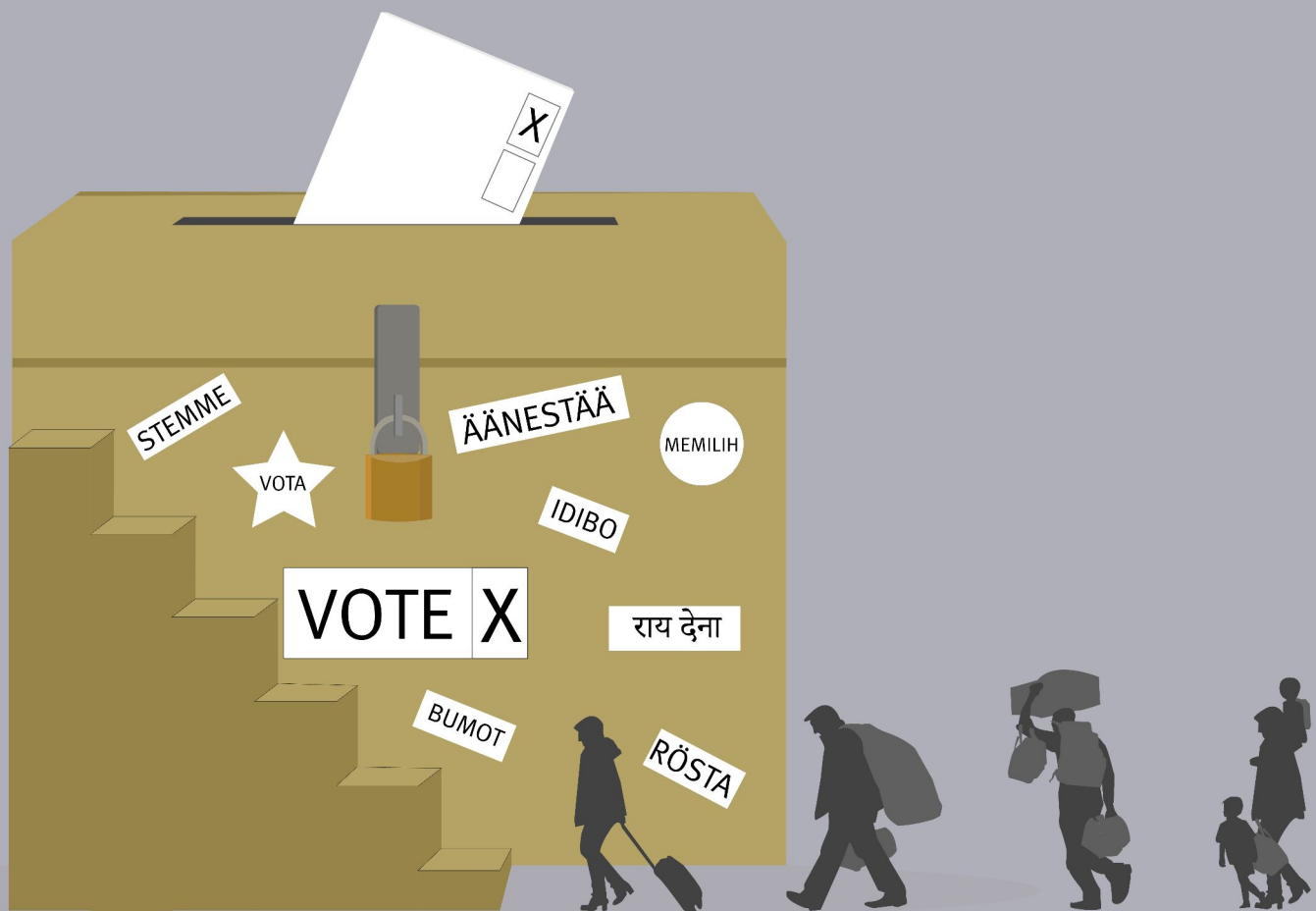


Political Participation of Refugees

The Case of Syrian and Somali Refugees in Sweden





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Tarig Adan
Lina Antara (series editor)



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Contents



Abbreviations	5
Acknowledgments	6
1. Introduction	7
2. Host-country context: Sweden	9
3. Refugees' and asylum seekers' political participation in the host country	13
4. Country-of-origin context	19
5. Refugee diasporans' political participation in their countries of origin	21
6. Conclusion and recommendations	24
References	26
Annex. Glossary of terms	33
About the authors	35
About the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project	36
About International IDEA	37

Abbreviations



MUCF	Myndigheten för ungdoms och civilsamhällesfrågor (Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society)
SD	Sweden Democrats
SAP	Social Democratic Party
SIOS	Samarbetsorgan för etniska organisationer i Sverige (Group of Ethnic Associations in Sweden)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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1. Introduction



The long-lasting and brutal conflicts in Syria and Somalia have given rise to the largest refugee flows since World War II. Refugees from these countries have been forced to seek safety and protection in bordering countries, but many have also left their countries hoping to find durable solutions, justice and democracy. As many refugees and asylum seekers lose hope of being able to return to their home countries, many are looking to rebuild their lives in destination countries that can offer stability and security for their families. For many, Europe is their final destination and hope (Redden 2014). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 55 per cent of refugees in 2016 originated from Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Somalia—all countries currently experiencing conflict, widespread violence and drought (UNHCR 2017). Drawing on the perspectives of Syrian and Somali refugees and asylum seekers based in Sweden, this case study examines the various formal and non-formal mechanisms for political participation in their host country and countries of origin, as well as the opportunities and challenges encountered.

The case study is based on a review of the available literature and secondary data about refugees' and asylum seekers' political participation, and was written as part of a larger research project on the same issue (Bekaj and Antara 2018). In addition, the case study builds on qualitative data collected in two focus group discussions, a questionnaire returned by 65 respondents and 22 one-to-one interviews carried out between May and June 2017. The same questionnaires were used during the focus group, but the responses and discussions were more extensive and open. The focus group discussions were conducted with 32 refugees aged between 18 and 60, among whom there was an equal number of men and women. The research was carried out in Stockholm's suburbs of Rinkeby, Tensta and Skärholmen, which all have a high concentration of immigrants, and in Malmö.

Table 1. Case study respondents' profiles and locations

Research site	Somali			Syrian		
	Male	Female	TOTAL	Male	Female	TOTAL
Malmö	2	1	3	8	7	15
Stockholm	19	12	31	11	5	16
TOTAL			34			31

Section 2 provides an overview of the host-country context, including a summary of Sweden's refugee and asylum policy and an overview of the requirements for refugees to obtain residence permits, citizenship and voting rights in Sweden. Section 3 presents an analysis of the different mechanisms for formal and non-formal political participation by refugees in Sweden. Section 4 outlines the context of the countries of origin and Section 5 sheds light on the participation of Syrian and Somali refugee diaspora in the political life of, and their role in democracy building in their countries of origin. The study concludes with a summary of the key findings and suggestions for relevant policy options for the political inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in their host country and countries of origin.

2. Host-country context: Sweden



In 2015, Sweden, a country of 9.9 million people, received the largest number of asylum applications per capita in the European Union (EU), almost 2 per cent of its total population. This put it in the world's top ten host countries in terms of refugee population per capita. Sweden was among the primary final destination countries in the EU for Syrian refugees in 2015 and made the second highest number of first-instance decisions granting refugee status to Syrian applicants (EASO 2016). According to data from Migrationsverket (the Swedish Migration Agency), around 163,000 people applied for asylum in Sweden in 2015, 51,338 of whom originated from Syria and 5465 from Somalia. In 2016 the volume of asylum applications dropped significantly to 28,939, of which 5457 were from people from Syria and 1646 from Somalia (Migrationsverket 2017). Syria and Somalia are also among the 10 most common countries of origin of foreign-born Swedish citizens (Statistics Sweden 2017).

Although many asylum seekers live in asylum accommodation centres, a large number of asylum seekers and refugees are scattered around the country. However, the majority of the refugee population is concentrated in the municipalities of Botkyrka, Göteborg, Helsingborg, Huddinge, Lund, Malmö, Solna, Stockholm, Södertälje and Uppsala (Statistiska Centralbyrån 2015). Syrians in Sweden have diverse religions, most notably Islam and Christianity, and mainly speak Arabic, Kurdish and Swedish, while the vast majority of Somali refugees are Muslim and speak Somali and Swedish (Statistics Sweden 2017). As of January 2017, approximately 170,000 Syrian and 65,000 Somali citizens were living in Sweden. In addition to refugees and asylum seekers, these figures also include children who are born in Sweden with a Somali or Syrian citizenship, or those who have been granted a permit to work or study. These figures exclude those who have obtained Swedish citizenship (Statistics Sweden 2017).

A recent UNHCR study suggests that Syrian refugees are highly educated compared to other nationalities (UNHCR 2015). Data from Statistics Sweden indicates that in 2014, 40 per cent of Syrians in the country had at least upper High School qualifications, while other immigrants, including Somalis, are on average less educated than Syrians (Koline-Seidl and Bolits 2016). Although there is no reliable data about why low levels of literacy are so prevalent among Somali refugees, according to some Swedish officials Somalis have done little to improve their educational status since arriving in Sweden. One possible explanation identified by officials is that many Somali refugees arrive in Sweden without any formal education (Salat 2010).

Box 1. Duration of Swedish residence permits granted to beneficiaries of protection

- **Refugee status.** Temporary residence permit valid for 3 years with right to family reunification if the application is made within three months of the residence permit being granted.
- **Subsidiary protection.** Temporary residence permit valid for 13 months with no right to family reunification. The permit is renewable for 2 years subject to eligibility criteria.
- **Humanitarian protection.** Under this category, a refugee is granted a residence permit valid for 13 months, renewable for a further 13 months, with the right to family reunification dependent on the individual case.

Source: Migrationsverket (2017)

Overview of Sweden's refugee and asylum policy

Sweden accepts both quota refugees through the UNHCR relocation system and asylum seekers arriving at its borders. In 2013 Sweden became the first EU country to grant permanent residence permits to asylum seekers from Syria (Radio Sweden 2013). Before 20 July 2016, the vast majority of residence permits granted to persons in need of international protection or on humanitarian grounds were permanent. These could, in principle, only be withdrawn if a person spent a major part of their time in another country or if a person was charged with a serious crime that involved deportation. Temporary residence permits were occasionally granted, mainly for medical reasons or during temporary delays prior to deportation (AIDA 2016).

In the second half of 2015, Sweden, like many EU member states, experienced significant challenges in dealing with the large influx of asylum seekers and the situation became unstable, placing great pressure on Swedish society and the Swedish Migration Agency. The government therefore took temporary measures to drastically reduce the number of asylum seekers. On 20 July 2016, a temporary law valid until 19 July 2019 was passed, limiting asylum seekers' opportunities to be granted permanent residence permits or reunited with their families. According to this law, refugees whose asylum claims are deemed genuine will be granted a three-year residence permit (Migrationsverket 2016; see also Box 1). The government openly declared that these measures were aimed at discouraging asylum seekers from coming to Sweden (Crouch 2015).

The Swedish Government has also introduced a programme known as 'fast track: quicker introduction of newly arrived immigrants' (Snabbspår–Snabbare etablering av nyanlända). This programme allows newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers with a high level of education and work experience to integrate more quickly into the labour market (Regeringskansliet 2015).

Requirements for refugees' political participation and naturalization

Access to citizenship

According to the Citizenship Act (2001: 22), to acquire Swedish citizenship through naturalization, a person must be able to prove his or her identity, have a permanent residence permit, have been resident in Sweden for a continuous period of five years and demonstrated 'good conduct' in Sweden. If the person is a refugee, only four years' residence in Sweden is



required (Migrationsverket 2017). The language requirements for citizenship acquisition have been lifted, for the purpose of faster integration (Mundzic 2015). Refugees who cannot provide proof of identity can become naturalized if they have been living in Sweden for eight years, but they must provide authorities with good grounds or reason to believe that their stated identity is correct (Government Offices of Sweden 2015a). The Swedish Migration Agency does not recognize Somali national passports issued after January 1991 and no Somali documents issued after that date, including birth certificates and identity cards, meet the migration agency's requirements (Migrationsverket 2015a). Hence, Somali refugees have to wait three years longer than other refugees before they can apply for Swedish citizenship.

There are no accurate or reliable statistics on how many beneficiaries of international protection obtained Swedish citizenship in 2016. However, the majority of people who submitted applications for citizenship in 2016 were originally from Somalia, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan or 'classified as stateless'. The Swedish Migration Agency received 63,960 applications for citizenship and issued decisions in 56,798 cases, of which 47,308 were granted citizenship (Migrationsverket 2016). Among the main nationalities of the applicants granted Swedish citizenship were Somali (7,988) and Syrian (4,098) (AIDA 2016).

Access to voting rights and political parties

While the right to vote and stand as a candidate in national legislative elections is only granted to Swedish citizens, Sweden extended municipal and provincial voting rights to resident non-citizens in 1976. Arguing that it would boost the political influence, interest and self-esteem of resident non-citizens, the Swedish Local Government Act of 1977 introduced the right to vote and stand as a candidate in regional and municipal elections to resident non-citizens above the age of 18, provided that they had three years of continuous residence in Sweden before election day. The main arguments in favour of this measure were those of equal participation, political inclusion and to encourage a feeling of having a stake in society. The right of resident non-citizens to vote in regional and municipal elections is currently stipulated in the Swedish Local Government Act (2004: 31), while the Act on Regional and Local Referendums (1994: 692) establishes the right to vote in regional and local referendums. In order to be able to exercise their right to vote, eligible voters must be included on the electoral roll (Bernitz 2013).

The Election Authority (Valmyndigheten) is responsible for conducting voter information activities and ensuring that all voters are aware of the electoral process. To this end, migrant voters are targeted through the use of minority languages in voter information campaigns. For instance, in the 2014 elections the Election Authority translated fact sheets on how to vote in elections to the national parliament, as well as the municipal and county councils into 31 languages, including Arabic and Somali (Mundzic 2015). A 2007 study observed that migrants' electoral participation was considerably lower than that of Swedish citizens, and questions have been raised regarding the degree to which this may be indicative of wider integration issues (Rahman 2007).

It is important to point out that asylum seekers in Sweden have no right to vote or participate in national, regional or local elections. However, once an asylum seeker is granted refugee status and a residence permit, and has fulfilled the residency requirements outlined above, he or she acquires the right to vote in municipal and provincial elections. Once a refugee has obtained Swedish citizenship, he or she has the right to vote in and stand for elections at both the local and the national level, and can participate in any political activity.

Any legal resident non-citizen, including refugees with permanent residence permits, can join any political party of their choice. Party membership can be requested through online forms or by visiting the nearest party office in the area. In certain cases, political parties have adopted voluntary quotas to increase internal diversity. For instance, the Social Democratic Party (Socialdemokraterna, SAP) have introduced quotas for candidates with non-Nordic

immigrant backgrounds, including refugees. In the 2014 elections, one in every four candidates on the SAP list in the electoral district of Stockholm had an immigrant background. These quotas are seen as an instrument for ensuring the party's commitment to increase the number of politicians from an immigrant background and as a means to rectify the underrepresentation of immigrants in political life (Dähnke et al. 2014).

Access to civil society organizations

In Sweden, refugees also have the right to establish organizations and associations. According to the Swedish anti-discrimination law and the right to equality enshrined in the constitution, refugees' organizations are funded and supported by the state and local municipalities through the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (Myndigheten för ungdoms och civilsamhällesfrågor, MUCF). There are no legal restrictions on migrants or other minority groups joining or setting up civil society organizations (Mundzic 2015). The requirements for establishing an association or organization involve a few simple technical and legal steps, most notably registration of the new organization with the relevant institutions. Hence, many refugee groups have founded their own organizations on arrival in Sweden. Many of these local refugees' organizations participate in national networks or umbrella organizations of immigrants from the same country of origin or with the same cultural background. For example, the Group of Ethnic Associations in Sweden (Samarbetsorgan för etniska organisationer i Sverige, SIOS) is an umbrella organization for approximately 20 groups. The organization focuses on immigrants' native language and culture, equality and democracy, and as of 2014 had around 80,000 individual members (Bivald et al. 2014).

3. Refugees' and asylum seekers' political participation in the host country



In Sweden, political participation by citizens and eligible resident non-citizens remains a fundamental principle of democratic legitimacy. For migrants, and refugees in particular, political and civic engagement can play an important role in their integration into society. Political participation offers a direct mechanism for voicing their concerns and interests, and for joining with others to advocate for necessary changes at the community, regional and national levels. While the issue of political participation by refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants and minorities has received increased attention in research in recent years, major gaps remain in our understanding of refugees' perspectives and the challenges preventing their effective participation in political life.

Formal political participation

The focus group participants from both the Syrian and the Somali refugee communities demonstrated that refugees have differing opinions regarding formal political participation and representation. A majority of the Syrian respondents were new arrivals, and had resided in Sweden for between one and five years. They were still struggling to establish themselves, find jobs and housing, and learn the language. Hence, they were primarily concerned about their current living conditions, the conflict within Syria and other pending issues as non-citizens. By contrast, the majority of Somali respondents had been residing in Sweden for more than five years and had either obtained permanent residency or acquired Swedish citizenship.

Interestingly, only 53 per cent of those Syrian and Somali respondents with the right to vote indicated that they had voted in the most recent national and general election in 2014, while 23.4 per cent of the total number of participants indicated that they did not have the right to vote. Many did, however, acknowledge the importance and the implications of exercising this right: 'It is my right as a citizen to participate in how and which direction Sweden is governed' (Chairman of Somali National Association, Stockholm, 2017); and 'If you get the right to vote, you have to exercise it, because it doesn't only affect you but a whole nation' (Somali naturalized refugee 2, Tensta-Spånga, Stockholm, 2017).

Nonetheless, according to the majority of the participants, voter turnout among refugees has been decreasing in every election and statistics show that it is significantly lower compared to that of the native-born population. In the 2014 municipal council elections, the

turnout among voters with Swedish citizenship was 85.9 per cent, whereas only 46.1 per cent of eligible voters holding the citizenship of an African country and 29.1 per cent of eligible voters from an Asian country cast a ballot. In the 2014 legislative elections, the turnout among naturalized Swedish citizens was 72.8 per cent, as opposed to 89.2 per cent of the native-born eligible voters (Statistics Sweden 2014). However, it is important to note that there is no systematic data indicating the proportion of voters with a refugee background.

Various factors contribute to the low level of participation by and representation of refugees. The individual factors that affect voter turnout are perhaps best thought of as similar to the classic categories of social stratification, such as class, income, gender, level of education and the differences between people born in the country and those not, and the term individual might therefore be a bit misleading. This underlines why turnout is seen as so informative about political equality. Among the individual factors, the literature distinguishes between resources and motivation. The former include gender, age, education, income and occupation. An additional aspect to consider is that the number of foreign-born voters increased considerably between 2010 and 2014 and the tendency to vote is lower among those who have only recently been awarded Swedish citizenship (Statistics Sweden 2015).

During the 2014 elections, although turnout was lower than expected, many refugee voters argued that they made an effort to mobilize voters from the refugee community in order to gather enough votes to prevent the rise of an anti-immigrant party, the *Sverigedemokraterna* (Sweden Democrats, SD). Nonetheless, the SD received 12.9 per cent of the votes and became the third largest party in the Swedish Parliament, doubling its support and gaining 49 of the 349 seats. Many respondents have expressed concern about the growing support for the SD and reacted to the party's anti-immigrant platform. During the interviews and focus groups, many respondents were concerned that the SD is gaining a high number of anti-immigration supporters from their local communities as the political situation in Sweden is dramatically changing, and recognized that refugees will definitely face consequences: 'The rise of the far-right in Sweden is very worrying. . . . The country is already struggling with anti-immigrant extremists who have attacked refugees and planted explosive devices near asylum centres' (Syrian refugee 1, Malmö, 2017).

Some of the refugees who participated in this research stated that the political parties most favorable to immigrants, such as the SAP, are gradually losing support among Swedish voters, while support for anti-immigrant parties is rising sharply. This trend indicates that the character of political parties in Sweden is gradually changing. Refugee representatives interviewed for this study highlighted the importance of refugees' political inclusion to counterbalance the rise of anti-immigrant groups, explaining that the exclusion of refugees' narratives from the political arena leaves space for the proliferation of misconceptions about refugees among the host population: 'If refugees are excluded from political participation and their voices are not heard in the political arena, there is a risk of dissatisfaction in some segments of the host society. This could undermine democratic ideas and political equality' (Syrian female refugee 1, Malmö, 2017).

A politician with a refugee background discussed how the SAP has tried to set up effective links with the various refugee organizations and succeeded in mobilizing refugee voters. Because it was considered a pro-refugee and pro-immigrant political party, according to interviewees, the SAP got most migrants' votes in the 2014 election (Somali refugee and representative of SAP, Tensta-Spånga, Stockholm, 2017).

During the focus group discussions, many participants agreed that the process of becoming a member of a political party in Sweden is very simple and open to all, regardless of status as refugee or citizen: 'There are a lot of refugees and other immigrants who are active members of the SAP. A person can be either a regular or an active member. To be an active member, one must pay SEK 240 per year. This is to show your commitment to the



party and the fee is also part of the financial contribution to the party' (Somali naturalized member of local city council and member of the SAP, Malmö, 2017). Some participants recognized the value of active membership of political parties:

I have been a member of the Moderate Party for more than five years, which has given me a lot of experience through my activities as a youth activist in the party. I acted as party recruiter for more than one year. I never had any challenges in the party. On the contrary, my active participation as a party member gave me a lot of opportunities to grow personally and professionally.

—Somali naturalized refugee 3, Stockholm, 2017

However, the majority of the respondents from both the Syrian and the Somali refugee communities highlighted that, even though there are no restrictive laws and membership requirements, there is still a representation gap, and refugees remain underrepresented as candidates and as elected members of local councils, municipalities and the national parliament. Although immigrants', including refugees', representation in political assemblies has increased in recent decades, the foreign-born population is still underrepresented (Bevelander and Spång 2017). At the 2010 municipal elections, foreign-born candidates made up 9.1 per cent of the total number of candidates, while in the 2014 elections this figure increased to 9.7 per cent. A slight increase has also been observed in the number of foreign-born municipal councillors, from 7.6 per cent in 2010 to 7.7 per cent in 2014 (Election Authority 2014). Political underrepresentation of refugees and other minority groups poses deep challenges for democratic practices and norms. Despite the favourable legal framework, outcomes for refugees and other minorities' political participation have not lived up to the goals of equality or equal opportunity (SOU 2005). An important institutional factor is the presence of discriminatory and negative pictures of migration-related issues in local society and the media. In politics, immigrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, are often described as people with regard to whom measures need to be taken, rather than as independent actors who should be actively participating in political processes and be represented in political institutions (SOU 2005).

Although refugees have access to various opportunities and are able to participate in the political and civic life of Sweden, studies indicate that refugees or immigrants continue to face various obstacles. Being a politician with an immigrant background may offer a way into politics but can in the long run also present difficulties for advancement. It is also widely acknowledged in political circles that internal and external networking and connections are very important. Refugees who lack an internal network or connections during a party's nomination process find it very difficult, if not impossible, to break through (Bevelander and Spång 2017).

In addition, research indicates that experiences of discrimination and prejudice have a negative impact on migrants' political participation, as they contribute to a general feeling of exclusion and distrust in political parties and institutions. Hence, the problem is not a general lack of interest in or knowledge about politics among immigrants, but a lower level of confidence in the possibility of achieving change through political participation (SOU 2005). According to Somaliska Radio (Radio Sweden Somali 2014), 24 naturalized Somali candidates, including two female candidates, ran for different positions in the 2014 elections, mainly at the regional level. While only one of the candidates made it to the national parliament, several Somali candidates were elected in local municipalities across the country. As one participant noted: 'Voters with an immigrant or minority background might expect to be represented by politicians with the same background since they might feel a sense of

shared fate that encourages group solidarity’ (Somali naturalized female refugee 2, Rinkeby, Stockholm, 2017).

In the focus group discussions, many older and lower-skilled Somali community members told how they felt singled out and discriminated against in political life (Somali refugee focus group 2, Stockholm, 2017):

I have to say that, in Sweden, most often organizations and political parties are welcoming towards people with migrant backgrounds and sometimes even run special recruitment campaigns. But in reality the political participation of migrants has not been at the top of the political agenda.

—Somali naturalized female refugee 1, Skärholmen, Stockholm, 2017

Indeed, candidates with a refugee background are often placed in unfavourable positions on party lists, with little or no possibility of getting elected. Such discriminatory practices by party gatekeepers contribute to a large extent to the underrepresentation of refugees in formal political institutions (Dancygier et al. 2015).

It is also important to note that middle aged and educated members of the Somali community recognized that the Somali community has the human capacity to promote political and civic integration, but many among the older generation and new arrivals, as well as female refugees, require some form of awareness raising to enhance their understanding of the political system and realize their potential to participate in political life at all levels:

It is very important to learn how the democratic system works. Many people like me don’t understand the meaning of democracy. There is no voting system in my home country and lack of knowledge of the Swedish language is a big barrier to the integration of refugees into all aspects of the host society.

—Somali naturalized female refugee 2, Rinkeby, Stockholm, 2017

The need for adequate information and education about civic and political rights and the political system in the host country was also flagged by members of the Syrian refugee community, who noted that they had little or no experience of participating in democratic processes in their country of origin.

Non-formal political participation

Respondents in Malmö and Stockholm recognized that the level of non-formal political participation by refugees is low. At the same time, they indicated that refugees who have obtained Swedish citizenship have a higher rate of participation, mostly attributed to their long residence and network of connections. Refugee organizations and associations with a long history of political participation in Sweden are more experienced and have easier access to resources and contacts than the newly-established ones (Mundzic 2015). A number of associations are well known and very active among the Syrian and Somali communities. The Syrian National Association in Sweden (Syrianska Riksförbundet) was founded in 1978 and as of 2015 had 12,653 members. The association’s mission is to protect the Syrian minority’s ethnic, cultural, linguistic and social interests (Mundzic 2015). The Somalia National Association of Sweden (Somaliska Riksförbundet i Sverige) is an active Somali Association that was established in 1995. Its goal is to promote community development and political participation in both Sweden and Somalia (Somaliska Riksförbundet i Sverige 2017). Other organizations focus on social issues at the community level: ‘I am a member of a youth



network targeting refugee youth between 17 and 25 years old. We organize events such as university days, discussion forums, graduation dinners and lectures in various locations' (Somali female refugee 1, Stockholm, 2017).

In some cases, refugees have established civil society organizations to advocate for political inclusion and provide capacity-building for young refugee leaders. An illustrative example is The Young Republic, a youth organization working to empower young Syrians and foster democratic participation, civic engagement and social inclusion in their host communities (Co-founder and chair of the Young Republic, Stockholm, 2017).

Others, such as the Somali Association of Sweden, do not directly advocate for the political participation of refugees but instead cooperate with various stakeholders to promote the interests of the Somali community. They also organize awareness-raising and training activities for newly arrived refugees to inform them at an early stage about their rights and obligations, increase their understanding of the host country and contribute to smoother integration (Chairman of Somali National Association, Stockholm, 2017):

The integration of refugees and their children plays a crucial role in the civic and political life of the host country. Obtaining a residence permit and citizenship allows the refugees the right to vote, take part in formal political life and be involved in all levels of the decision-making process in society. Many EU countries, including Sweden, are realizing that refugees have become important political stakeholders for both the host country and their country of origin. Sadly, many of them (refugees) are not aware of how significant their participation in the politics of the host country is.

—Somali member of local city council, Malmö, 2017

A notable example of a refugee-led initiative is Järva Veckan, an annual forum that brings together Swedish political party leaders with representatives of migrant and refugee organizations, local authorities, private companies and citizens to discuss issues related to integration, diversity and inclusion. The initiative was started by a Somali refugee in 2016 and takes place in a suburb with a high concentration of migrants and refugees, with a view to reducing the gap between suburban residents and politicians, creating better conditions for migrants and refugees to engage in politics and putting their questions on the political agenda (*Expressen* 2017; *The Global Village* 2017).

There are no legal or eligibility barriers to refugees joining or becoming elected representatives of a trade union. Refugees with temporary or permanent residence permits are allowed to join trade unions, provided that they are employed or enrolled in formal education, pay their membership fees and comply with the rules of the union. In particular, members of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (*Landsorganisationen*) support the participation of migrant workers through different measures, such as the provision of information in several languages and the employment of ombudsmen or 'interpreters' with a mandate to connect migrant workers with trade unions (Mundzic 2015): 'The trade union movement has an important and natural task in opposing and combating all forms of discrimination and hostility towards refugees. Unfortunately, many have experienced discrimination at all levels. It is very important that Swedish trade unions make an effort to educate refugees and include them in their activities' (Somali naturalized refugee and interpreter 1, Stockholm, 2017).

Another form of participation is through protests and demonstrations in Sweden, mostly linked to resistance to changes in Swedish refugee and asylum policy or other issues affecting refugees at the community level. For instance, in 2016 refugees united their voices with grassroots movements to protest in Stockholm and 14 other cities against forced deportations

and the abolition of permanent residence permits for refugees (Mortimer 2016). Other examples include the organization of protests against restrictions on the naturalization of Somali refugees, who have to wait three years more than other refugees to be eligible for naturalization (Chairman of Somali National Association, Stockholm, 2017).

4. Country-of-origin context



Syria

The Syrian state has collapsed since the start of pro-democracy movements against the presidency of Bashar Al-Assad in the spring of 2011. The brutal and divisive war that ensued has claimed over a million deaths and has created over five million refugees, as well as hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (The Guardian 2016). The first three months of 2017 saw more than 250,000 additional Syrians register as refugees, bringing the total to 5.1 million (Al Rifai 2017). A total of 884,461 Syrian refugees applied for asylum in Europe between April 2011 and October 2016 (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2017).

The prolonged violent conflict is the greatest barrier to development and democracy in Syria (Rogers 2015). State and public structures have collapsed and large parts of the country are controlled by various armed groups (Ministry for Foreign Affairs Sweden 2015). Reports (CNN Library 2017) show that political and civic life in Syria is highly restricted and the decision-making process is dominated by the ruling party. Nevertheless, a growing and more active, although still fragile, civil society has also emerged since the conflict started (Ministry for Foreign Affairs Sweden 2015). Although Syrian respondents indicated that they have no space for or interest in participating in formal political activities in their country of origin under the current conditions, the Syrian refugee diaspora is involved in various non-formal political activities that seek to promote peace and democracy in their country of origin.

The majority of the Syrian participants in this case study were new arrivals and many felt that it was too early to address or openly discuss the political situation in Syria. Furthermore, many participants were reluctant to share their thoughts about their political involvement in their home country, as many of them experienced extremely stressful events. Some participants noted that Syrian refugees in Sweden are deeply divided and fragmented, and each group does not want to be associated with the other: 'The division and fragmentation between the Syrian refugees here in Sweden is huge and is a major problem in the community. The Syrian diaspora in Sweden can be categorized into four groups: (a) a pro-government group; (b) an anti-government group; (c) the Kurdish community; and (d) the middle-of-the-road group. The latter group is neutral and does not have any direct links or connections with any political group or government' (Co-founder and Chair of The Young Republic, Stockholm, 2017).

Somalia

Somalia has never really recovered from the civil war, which began in 1991 with the overthrow of its president. The absence of a strong central government provides space for warlords and armed factions to vie for political and economic dominance. Over the past 26 years, Somalia has also frequently served as a proxy battleground for international actors and ideologies, for warlords and clans and for Islamist extremism (Ibrahim 2013).

The number of Somali refugees worldwide increased from 1.11 million in 2014 to 1.12 million in 2015, and Somalia remains among the countries producing the highest number of refugees. Kenya and Ethiopia continued to host a large number of refugees from Somalia (417,900 and 256,700 respectively) at the end of 2015. Other countries that host a large number of Somalis are Yemen (252,200), South Africa (41,500) and Uganda (27,700). Outside Africa, Sweden is among the countries that host the largest numbers of Somali refugees (63,853) (UNHCR 2015). In 2016, 1646 new arrivals from Somalia applied for asylum in Sweden. In the same year, 1,745 applications were granted. The recognition rate for Somali cases is about 45 per cent (AIDA 2017). According to the focus group discussion with a Somali women's group: 'The Sweden-based Somali diaspora can be divided in two categories: those who arrived as refugees and asylum seekers from the 1980s onwards; and those who are Swedish-born (second-generation migrants). The first group maintains the closest ties to its homeland' (Somali Women's Focus Group 1, Tensta-Spånga, Stockholm, 2017).

Even though Somalia has no functioning central government, the Somali diaspora remains fully engaged with the home country through various means, such as philanthropic activities, sending remittances, commercial investments, knowledge and skills transfer schemes, and political and civic participation. One success story is the effective role of the Somali diaspora in supporting relief and development activities in its country of origin (Hammond 2012).

5. Refugee diasporans' political participation in their countries of origin



Formal political participation

Despite an initial commitment to organize universal elections in 2016, Somali political actors adopted a political transition process with only limited electoral features that were not in line with the principles of universal suffrage. Instead, a system of indirect elections took place, whereby political power was divided among clan groups. In the absence of 'one person, one vote', Somalia has implemented a power sharing formula designed to allocate political representation among these clans. This structure allows clan elders to select the membership of the House of the People and the Senate, who are then responsible for electing the president. In the 2016 legislative elections, an electoral college of approximately 14,000 clan elders and prominent Somali figures elected the 275 members of the House of the People. The 54 Senators were elected indirectly by state parliaments, which had in turn been appointed by clan leaders (EU Election Expert Mission to Somalia 2017).

Somalia's Constitution does not exclude dual passport holders from running for the presidency or participating in formal political processes (Gaffey 2017). Remarkably, of the 24 candidates standing in Somalia's presidential election in 2017, 16 were foreign passport holders (nine Somali–American, four Somali–British and three Somali–Canadian). Members of the Somali diaspora are now highly visible in the senior leadership of political institutions as heads of state, parliamentarians, cabinet members and officials. For example, the current president (Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo) is a dual US–Somali national, while the current prime minister (Hassan Ali Khayre) and the current Speaker (Mohamed Osman Jawari) are Norwegian–Somalis:

[The] Somali diaspora can have an important impact on the political life of my country of origin. They campaign and collect money for many politicians they wish to support. Thus, they have the power to support a party or politician who has the potential to implement democracy.

—Somali naturalized refugee 3, Stockholm, 2017

Indeed, during the 2016 legislative and 2017 presidential elections, ‘foreign political contributions were not regulated but appear to have played a significant role. Some candidates made official and unofficial visits overseas, reportedly to seek foreign political support and/or receive funds’ (EU Election Expert Mission to Somalia 2017).

Although legal provisions were established in the 1970s to accord equal rights to women, they have had only a limited impact due to the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms and the persistence of long-standing traditions limiting women’s ability to participate in political life and formal decision-making processes (United Nations Development Programme 2014). The traditional gender roles prevalent in the country are to a large extent replicated among the Somali diaspora in Sweden: ‘Even at the family or community level, women have a very limited say in the decisions affecting themselves and their families’ (Somali refugee 1, Stockholm, 2017).

In the absence of a system of ‘one person, one vote’ and provisions for out-of-country voting, the Somali participants in this case study were mainly focused on discussing other forms of political engagement with their country of origin. It was notable that a majority of the Somali respondents expressed their disagreement with the current electoral system and were eager to see direct elections based on universal suffrage.

Similarly, the Syrian case study participants noted that opportunities for formal political participation in their country of origin were severely limited, given the ongoing conflict and the restricted civic and political space. During the 2014 presidential election, only ‘legal’ expatriate Syrians were allowed to vote in Syrian embassies in certain selected countries. Refugees who were deemed to have ‘fled illegally’ were not eligible to vote (Associated Press 2014). Electoral law excluded non-Muslim candidates and anyone who had lived outside Syria in the past 10 years or held a foreign passport, thus excluding any possibility that opposition figures who had left the country fleeing persecution might stand (Darke 2014). For those eligible to vote, out-of-country voting was carried out in Syrian embassies abroad. While some countries prevented Syrian citizens from voting in their embassies, Syrians from opposing sides of the conflict gathered outside the Embassy in Stockholm to express their views and cast their ballots, with Assad supporters outnumbering those who opposed him (Associated Press 2014).

Non-formal political participation

Non-formal political participation by the refugee diaspora in their countries of origin can take different forms, both positive and negative. On the one hand, support may be aimed at promoting peace building by seeking alternatives to violence (Hammond et al. 2011), and democracy-building through the diffusion of democratic ideas. On the other hand, some diaspora funding and technical support are used to purchase arms or support insurgents. In addition, active mobilization takes place within the diaspora, by word of mouth as well as the proliferation of pro-insurgent websites (Abdile 2010). In this context, the Somali diaspora has been heavily involved in the political life of its country of origin. The diaspora is estimated to send USD 1.4 billion to Somalia each year, which is crucial for the country’s economy. These remittances contribute 23 per cent of Somalia’s gross domestic product and surpass any amount of aid given to the country (World Bank 2016). Apart from the financial remittances, the diaspora has important ties to clans and political groups, and wields considerable influence on political affairs inside Somalia. Furthermore, the highly skilled members of the diaspora have made use of their education and professional experience to participate in the politics of Somalia (Ismail 2011). During the focus group discussion, many of the Somali participants recognized that the diaspora is a vital political asset and that they are connected to their country of origin in many ways, most notably through the implementation of humanitarian and development programmes in their home countries:



'The Somali diaspora community contributes to the development of its country of origin through investment and financial remittances. In particular, Somalis living in Sweden have long been crucial to the Somali economy. Today, the Somali diaspora in Sweden has assumed a vital role as a source of remittances to their family members in Somalia' (Somali refugee 1, Stockholm, 2017).

Furthermore, several participants stated that the diaspora can initiate or contribute to policy dialogue at the national, regional or international levels, and serve as a bridge between host country and country of origin. Members can also support the creation of transnational networks and civil society organizations with a focus on capacity-building among youth, education and the transfer of democratic values to their country of origin:

By building schools and organizations in Somalia that educate the youth about democracy, the diaspora can help give Somali citizens the power to change their future.

—Somali refugee 1, Stockholm, 2017

The use of social media was also identified as an important avenue for members of the diaspora to express their political views and engage in political debate. One example is a Facebook group with more than 6,000 members of the Sweden-based Somali diaspora, where followers can discuss different events and developments related to their country of origin (Somali female refugee 2, Stockholm, 2017).

Some of the respondents noted that, when they consider it necessary, they carry out community mobilization and organize demonstrations to draw attention to the situation in their homeland. To this end, Syrian participants acknowledged the potential for the refugee diaspora to put pressure on the host country and the international community about issues related to their country of origin without having to fear repression. In particular, Syrian activists outside the country are mainly involved in connecting the voices of protesters inside the country to the outside world, by disseminating information about the Syrian civil war and collaborating with professional journalists to raise awareness of the situation in Syria among the public (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013): 'I participated in many protests in Stockholm against the war in Syria and in solidarity with the people in my country. . . . It is important to express our voice and to unite for peace and democracy in my country' (Syrian refugee 1, Malmö, 2017).

However, it was also noted that Syrian activists often refrain from such activities for fear of reprisals against family members still living in Syria. According to some of the respondents, in the past the Syrian security forces have resorted to detaining relatives and neighbours to discourage government critics. Indeed, during this study many Syrian respondents would often only provide vague answers and were reluctant to disclose their identity or share their names, fearing possible reprisal: 'Because of the ongoing conflict in Syria and the family connection, it is very hard for Syrians to share information with you...even most of the fellow Syrian refugees keep their distance from me and have doubts about my work' (Syrian staff member at the Swedish Labor Office, Stockholm, 2017). Similar findings have emerged from other studies conducted among the Syrian refugee diaspora in Sweden. These indicate that diaspora mobilization is hindered significantly by surveillance, intelligence reports, and threats against activists abroad and their family members still living in their country of origin (Lundgren Jörum 2015).

6. Conclusion and recommendations



The results of the case study indicate that Syrian and Somali refugees in Sweden have at their disposal various formal and non-formal mechanisms for participation in the political life of their host country, even before acquiring Swedish citizenship. They have the right to vote and stand as candidates in municipal and county elections, the right to join political parties and participate in electoral campaigns, platforms that bring them closer to politicians and government representatives to discuss issues affecting their interests, opportunities to organize or participate in protests and make their voices heard, and the right to form associations and civil society organizations and join trade unions. Despite these favourable legal frameworks and policies, however, visible and invisible barriers make it difficult for refugees to participate in Swedish politics on equal terms with the native-born population. One factor is the lack of knowledge or awareness of the importance of democracy and political participation and its impact on the refugee population, and therefore of understanding of the need to vote. This lack of knowledge and information sharing also contributes to the lack of interest in being part of the decision-making processes in the host country. Furthermore, some respondents highlighted the fact that they feel isolated and marginalized from mainstream society, and that this is one factor that discourages them from participating in the political and civic life of Sweden.

It is also important to consider that both Somali and Syrian refugees experienced war, displacement and conflict before their arrival in Sweden, and have lived for decades under authoritarian regimes. Hence, they have little to no experience of democratic participation in their countries of origin, which in turn affects their participation in the political life of their host country. Another key finding was that both Syrian and Somali refugee women face particular challenges and are widely excluded from political life in their host country and countries of origin, due to persistent cultural, religious and structural barriers. It was also noted that refugees and asylum seekers face 'more urgent' challenges in the early years after their arrival in their host country, from finding accommodation and learning the Swedish language, to finding suitable employment and adapting to a new political and cultural environment. As a result, their political participation can be limited, especially in the years directly following their arrival in Sweden, as the Syrian refugees in this case study show.

Diaspora communities can make a significant contribution to building bridges between states and promoting democracy in their countries of origin. The case of the Somali diaspora is a good example of this, as it showcases how to use skills and experience acquired in Sweden to enhance ongoing political and economic development, and engage constructively in shaping the policies of the country of origin. However, as the case of the Syrian refugees

shows, ethnic, religious and political fragmentation, as well as authoritarian legacies can be important factors hindering the effective engagement of the diaspora in the political life of the country of origin. That said, if the political and security situations permit, both the Syrian and the Somali diaspora possess skills and expertise that would allow them to engage constructively in the political life of their countries of origin.

In light of the above, a number of policy options and recommendations are set out below to increase political and civic participation by refugees and asylum seekers in their host countries and countries of origin.

Recommendations

For the host country

- State and local authorities and civil society actors should collaborate to deliver awareness raising activities and information campaigns targeted at newly arrived refugees, with a specific focus on women refugees, in order to inform them about their civic and political rights, the political system and the different channels for participation in Swedish political life.
- Municipal authorities, political parties and civil society organizations should cooperate to create platforms that bring together refugees and host country populations and decision-makers to discuss the issues that affect their communities.
- Political parties should avoid discriminatory practices and promote diversity and equal opportunities by nominating more candidates with refugee backgrounds and placing them in positions on their party lists where they have a real chance of getting elected.
- Refugee organizations should work more closely with Swedish civil society and government agencies to conduct in-depth, comprehensive assessments that identify the specific factors that affect levels of political participation by and representation of refugees in their communities.

For the countries of origin

- Governments, decision-makers and political parties in the countries of origin should put in place mechanisms for the engagement of the refugee diaspora in peace negotiations and consultations on electoral reform, with a view to ensuring that refugees' issues and concerns are reflected in any transitional or post-conflict arrangements.
- Governments and decision-makers in the countries of origin should explore means to facilitate the effective exercise of voting rights by refugees in post-conflict elections through out-of-country voting.
- Civil society and diaspora organizations should design and implement capacity-building programmes, in particular for refugee women and youth to help them understand the importance of political participation and the various avenues for contributing to peace and democracy-building in their countries of origin.
- Syrian and Somali diaspora organizations in Sweden should build transnational networks with other diaspora groups and partner with civil society organizations on the ground to share lessons learned and maximize their advocacy efforts.

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Annex. Glossary of terms



Asylum

A form of protection given by a state on its territory based on internationally or nationally recognized refugee rights. It is granted to a person who is unable to seek protection in her or his country of nationality and/or residence, in particular for fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

Asylum seeker

A person who seeks safety from persecution or serious harm in a country other than her or his own and is awaiting a decision on an application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments.

Country of origin

A country from which people leave to settle abroad permanently or temporarily (IOM 2011).

Diaspora

A group of individuals (and members of networks, associations and communities) who have left their country of origin but maintain links with their homeland. This concept covers more settled communities, migrant workers based abroad temporarily, expatriates with the nationality of the host country, dual nationals, and second- and third-generation migrants.

Formal political participation

For the purposes of this research, formal political participation is understood as participation in decision-making through formal democratic institutions and processes such as national and local elections, referendums, political parties and parliaments.

Host country

The country where a refugee is settled. In the case of asylum seekers, the country where a person has applied for asylum.

Internally displaced person

A person who has been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their home or places of habitual residence, in particular because of (or in order to avoid) the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-induced

disasters, but who has not crossed an internationally recognized state border (United Nations Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights 1998).

Migrant

Any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from her/his habitual place of residence, regardless of (a) the person's legal status; (b) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (c) what the causes for the movement are; or (d) what the length of the stay is (IOM 2011).

Naturalization

Granting by a state of its nationality to a non-national through a formal act on the application of the individual concerned (IOM 2011).

Non-formal political participation

For the purposes of this research, non-formal political participation is understood as participation in political affairs through non-formal means, such as civil society organizations, trade unions, consultative bodies, community organizations, grassroots movements and so on.

Refugee

'A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' (Refugee Convention, article 1A(2), 1951). In addition, article 1(2) of the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention defines a refugee as any person compelled to leave her or his country 'owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality'. Similarly, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration states that refugees also include persons who flee their country 'because their lives, security or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violations of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order' (IOM 2011).

Resettlement

The transfer of refugees from the country in which they have sought refuge to another state that has agreed to admit them (IOM 2011).

Transnationalism

The process whereby people establish and maintain socio-cultural connections across geopolitical borders (IOM 2011).

About the authors



Tarig Adan is a Somali refugee living in Sweden. She specializes in local integration, the promotion of human rights, the protection of vulnerable persons, and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence. She holds a degree in social work and community development from Kampala International University.

She has previously worked with various humanitarian and development organizations in East Africa and the Horn of Africa on issues related to refugees, internally displaced persons and mix-migration groups. Her main interest is in working with and assisting vulnerable groups, in particular women and children, who have been through war and gender-based violence.

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About the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project



Refugees have the potential to make an impact on the political life of both their host countries and their countries of origin, as they often maintain transnational links with their homelands while at the same time becoming part of their host society. Recognizing the dual role of refugees as political actors, the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project aims to explore the challenges and opportunities related to the political participation of refugees in their host countries and countries of origin.

Among the formal mechanisms for political participation, the project explores issues of access to citizenship in host countries, electoral rights in both host countries and countries of origin, and membership or other forms of support to political parties. In addition, acknowledging that political life is not only confined to electoral processes, the project examines non-formal mechanisms for political participation, including refugees' participation in consultative bodies, civil society organizations, protests and grassroots initiatives, and other means of transnational political activism.

In 2018 the project produced a report, *Political Participation of Refugees: Bridging the Gaps*, which draws on eight case studies carried out through interviews and focus group discussions with refugees and key informants in host countries with high numbers of refugees. It offers cross-country insights into the experiences of refugee communities originating from five of the largest source countries.

The Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project was made possible by funding from the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

Download the case studies and the full report:
<<https://www.idea.int/our-work/what-we-do/migration-democracy>>

About International IDEA



The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

What do we do?

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work.

International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on good international democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity-building on democratic reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

Where do we work?

Our headquarters is located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, the Asia-Pacific, Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

<<http://www.idea.int>>

Drawing on individual perspectives of Syrian and Somali refugees in Sweden, this case study explores the formal and non-formal political participation of refugees and asylum seekers in their host country and the ways in which they are able to participate in peacebuilding and democracy-building in their countries of origin.

Among the formal mechanisms for political participation, the case study explores issues of access to citizenship in the host country, electoral rights in both the host country and countries of origin, and membership or other forms of support to political parties. In addition, it examines non-formal mechanisms for political participation, including refugees' participation in consultative bodies, civil society organizations, protests and grassroots initiatives, and other means of transnational political activism.

This case study is part of the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project and has informed the development of a longer report, *Political Participation of Refugees: Bridging the Gaps*, published by International IDEA in 2018.