

“Unheard Voices”-Somali children speak out

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A recently released children’s opinion poll conducted in Somalia paints a mixture of opinions, aspirations and dreams among Somali children.

The poll sampled 531 (286 boys, 245 girls) children aged between 9-17 years old in four key urban and rural locations in Somalia (Merca, Belletweyne, Bosaso and Hargeisa) and is the first of its kind in a country that has known no peace for close to 16 years.

The poll indicates that 90% of Somali children enjoy a remarkably good relationship with their parents. Children appreciate their parents most for their love, the fact that they communicate with them and generally take good care of them.

The poll indicates that parents are crucial in the instilling of important values. The polled children mentioned “to respect others”, “to tell the truth”, “not to steal”, and “to be responsible” as some of the most important values instilled by parents.

The poll indicates that a majority of two-thirds of the children believe that elections are a ‘very effective’/‘rather effective’ means to improve the state of things in a country. Analysis by area (urban/rural) and age indicates that the rural children have more faith in elections as a way to the improvement of the country’s state of affairs. For the polled aged bracket, none of them have experienced an election, for them to hold such an opinion is an indication that a civil children cohort is quickly emerging in Somalia.

Whilst the topic of “young people’s participation” is fast gaining recognition and space within development discourse, only 17% of all children claimed they were consulted on matters affecting them in their neighborhood. Among the balance, about a third claimed they were never consulted by the local authorities and a higher proportion (45%) were not sure/did not know of any system of consultation.

No single issue came up strongly when children were asked about matters they wish to be consulted on. Among the matters raised by varying proportions were the issues of education/school-related concerns, building of more schools and improvement of educational standards (12%). A small proportion (5-7%) referred to insecurity issue, hygiene/health matters/ dissemination of health information, building of sports facilities and the plight of the orphans/the vulnerable children and street kids respectively.

In a country where their diaspora affects and influences almost the entire on goings in the country, it was worth finding out on the children’s migration aspirations- if any. About 60% of the children claimed that they would prefer to continue staying in Somalia, whilst a third would consider living in another country. Among the countries considered for migration are USA (23%), UK/England/Britain (24%) and Asia (India/China etc) –17%

On the topic of “Role Models”, no particular person or character emerged strongly as a role model for the children. In fact a quarter of the children admired nobody. Proportions ranging from about 10-15% referred to:

- Traditional/religious leaders

- Athletes/sportsmen
- Musical groups/singers
- Teachers as persons they looked up to.

The polled children were quite focused and consistent in their vision of their country. A majority of the children – almost three quarters - were positive that Somalia would be a better place to live in, in future.

The reasons for being confident about their country's future were because they expect:

- *'Good governance'* (37%)
- *'Less delinquency/violence'* (25%)
- *'Better education'* (24%)
- *'Better economic situation'* (22%)
- *'Less poverty'* (10%)

Only 10% were less optimistic of the country's future, with their concerns falling on:

- *'A worse economic situation'*
- *'More delinquency in society'*

Among the cultural practices considered to be harmful by the children were:

- Female genital mutilation (57%) – higher mentions amongst the urban children, the older age group and females.
- Early marriage – more mentions amongst the older age – group (38%)
- Male circumcision
- Child bondage
- Polygamy

This poll will not only go down as being the first, but will be the very first time since the collapse of governance in Somalia, that Somali children have spoken about their dreams and aspirations.

The question is *"Who will listen to these emerging voices?"*