

## NGO-Government Relations and Immigrant Services: Contradictions and Challenges

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*This article critically examines the “Canadian model” of immigrant settlement service delivery. This is a system where most settlement services are provided through community-based, including ethno-specific, agencies funded primarily by the various levels of government. Although this model has been widely celebrated as an efficient, immigrant-friendly, and inclusive model to be emulated elsewhere, we argue that it is a system in crisis. Rather than continuing to promote this model uncritically, we examine the roots of this crisis and in this light offer a reconsideration of a series of current policy issues in immigrant service provision in Canada.*

*Cet article jette un regard critique sur le « Modèle canadien » de prestation de services d'établissement pour les immigrants. Il s'agit d'un système selon lequel la plupart des services d'établissement sont offerts par des agences communautaires, y compris des agences spécifiques aux groupes ethniques, financées principalement par divers paliers gouvernementaux. Bien que ce modèle ait été largement loué comme étant efficace, convivial, favorable à l'intégration et digne d'être émulé par d'autres pays, nous faisons valoir le point de vue selon lequel ce système connaît actuellement une crise. Plutôt que de continuer à faire la promotion de ce modèle sans le soumettre à un examen critique, nous nous penchons sur les causes profondes de cette crise. À la lumière de notre évaluation, nous proposons un nouveau regard sur une série de questions relatives aux politiques actuelles en matière de prestation de services pour les immigrants au Canada.*

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From a contemporary public policy perspective, what is the proper role of community-based organizations in the provision of settlement services in Canada? This is a broad question, but an urgent one and relevant to the international experience with immigration and settlement, as well as the Canadian context.

In the field of immigration and immigrant settlement, Canada is generally known to be unique in the group of Western industrialized democracies. Canada remains generally an immigrant-welcoming country, different in many ways from both Europe and the United States. Public discourse continues to focus mainly on the benefits of immigration and the rights of newcomers, distinct from the *security and terrorism* dialogue dominating immigration issues in the Bush-led US and the *fortress Europe* mentality prevalent in some of Western Europe. Moreover, Canada stands nearly alone in its commitment to mass migration as a centrepiece of its economic development strategy (Reitz, 2005).

Canada is also distinct in that a major portion of its settlement services is provided by community-based or *third sector* agencies, with funding from the three levels of government, as well as community charities and public and private foundations. This pattern of service provision is often promoted internationally by both government and non-government organization (NGO) representatives as a model to be emulated. Yet this system of service provision is increasingly in crisis. Rather than continuing to promote this model uncritically, it is now time to examine the roots of this crisis. Such an examination provides a useful starting point for considering a series of current policy issues in providing immigrant services in Canada including the following.

- The autonomy and advocacy role of the community-based settlement service sector;
- Challenges of public accountability in the provision of state-funded services through third sector agencies; and
- Relations and alliances between community-based settlement service providers and the host of other players involved in settlement services and advocacy for newcomers' rights.

### **Settlement in Canada: A Growing Crisis**

Canada's immigration policy is one of the most open and welcoming in the world, and Canada has one of the highest proportions of immigrants to

total resident population of any country in the world. As an officially multicultural and anti-racist society, Canada's inclusive policies of citizenship encourage newcomers to become citizens after only three years. For about 40 years after World War II, Canada was effective in promoting economic integration as the key to successful settlement of newcomers.

Today, however, we see a contradiction between official inclusion policies and the growing *social exclusion* of Canada's newcomers in the economic sphere and in social and public life more generally. During the last two decades, immigrants and refugees arriving in Canada have experienced severe difficulties in the Canadian labour market. During roughly the same period, the majority by far of these newcomers have been non-European visible minorities. For too many of these newcomers it has been a life of underemployment or unemployment, low income or poverty, and lost hope (Alboim & the Maytree Foundation, 2002; Ornstein, 2000; Li, 2003; Shields, 2003; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005). It is now common for Canadian research and policy studies to refer to the concentration of economic disadvantage and social exclusion in particular urban neighbourhoods with high concentrations of recent newcomers and visible minorities (Galabuzi, 2001; Kazemipur & Halli, 2000; United Way of Greater Toronto, 2004).

It is essential to recognize that for newcomers to Canada, the *settlement process is a lifelong journey*. Some aspects of the process even continue into the second or third generation: for example, equity issues and representation and balanced curriculum in the education system or the significance of multiculturalism as a policy framework for racialized communities. It is useful to think of this process as including three main stages (Mwarigha, 2002; Omidvar & Richmond, 2003). The first stage of initial reception (information and referral, language training, short-term shelter, etc.) is that for which Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) is mainly responsible. For the middle stage of the process, which involves securing long-term access to appropriate employment and housing, education, and so forth for all members of the newcomers' families, no single or lead federal department is responsible. Nor is responsibility assigned clearly to a single provincial or municipal branch or coalition of government departments. In the third stage newcomers develop some sense of attachment or belonging in Canada without giving up their ethno-racial identities and their ties to their homelands. In this latter stage they combat various forms of discrimination and institutional barriers to become fully engaged as active citizens. For this third stage there is some support from various departments of the three levels of government and from other players like school boards and private

and community foundations, but efforts are generally underresourced and not coordinated.

Given these factors in the current state of settlement in Canada, two conclusions appear evident. The first is that the principal failure of settlement at this time lies not in the first stage, for which CIC is responsible, but in the second stage. This involves (mainly) newcomers' integration into the labour market and recognition of their internationally acquired skills and education, for which no single government department or coalition of government bodies is responsible. The second and related conclusion is that we are witness to an astounding lack of coordination and integration of efforts for two of the three main stages of settlement. It is no exaggeration, therefore, to speak of a *policy crisis* that lies at the root of the challenges, and failures, in the settlement of Canada's newcomers. Unless these issues are addressed, it will not be possible to develop settlement as a process of true *social inclusion* in which immigrants and refugees realize full and equal participation in their new country (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003; Saloojee, 2003).

### **The Role of NGO Service Providers**

Historically, the Canadian model of providing government-funded settlement services through community-based organizations has served Canada's newcomers well, and the community-based settlement sector has accumulated a wealth of experience and expertise to contribute to improved settlement outcomes (for an extensive overview, see National Settlement Conference (2004) and the background papers *VSI National Working Groups Discussion Papers "Maximizing Settlement"*). But just as the settlement process has become more challenging in Canada in the last decade, so has the service system provided through community-based agencies come under increasing stress.

Nonprofit, community-based settlement service providers in Canada have long maintained that successful newcomer settlement is a lifelong process. Nevertheless, the government funding available to these agencies has been mainly for the first stage of settlement. And as the settlement process has become more challenging, the funding for community-based agencies is increasingly limited, unstable, and restrictive (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003; Richmond & Shields, 2004a, 2004b). The shift from stable or core to time-delimited and restrictive contract funding for community-based service delivery is intensifying existing problems in matching limited

resources to expanded demand. Furthermore, increasingly onerous and arbitrary accountability requirements from government funders are creating major administrative burdens at the agency level and further limiting the resources available for service provision and policy planning. To compound these problems, community-based settlement providers now face increasing competition for limited settlement service dollars from a broader range of potential providers including public educational institutions and private-sector providers. The promotion of competition among not-for-profit and for-profit service providers has been purposely built into the funding system as a mechanism to promote greater "efficiencies" in the provision of publicly supported services. One consequence of this development has been the fostering of a more contingent, contractually based relationship between government funders and community-based organizations as opposed to the nurturing of deeper meaningful partnerships (Shields & Evans, 1998; Evans, Richmond, & Shields, 2005).

With these changes we also see a growing monopolization in the community-based settlement sector with a loss of diversity of alternative services (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003; Richmond, 1996; Sadiq, 2004). Generally in the chaotic funding environment, it is the larger multi-service organizations that survive because they have more resources to devote to restructuring, administration, and negotiations with multiple funders. Many smaller community-based settlement services, particularly ethno-specific agencies, are forced into dependent partnerships with larger organizations; others have curtailed their services or even closed their doors.

Another result of these changes is a growing loss of autonomy and independent advocacy from the community-based settlement sector (Richmond, 2004). The voice of these agencies has historically been essential in the development of settlement policy, in promoting community development with newcomer communities, and in advocacy for anti-racism and equity. But funding restrictions, lack of resources, and an increasingly competitive environment are threatening to silence this voice.

### **Contradictions of Government Funding Policy**

It is important to recognize that the new government funding policies are not the result of accident, miscalculation, or simple bureaucratic bungling. These policies have been designed consciously and are implemented with increasing zeal to apply to the nonprofit health and social services sector as a whole. The transition to short-term, unstable contract funding is

based on New Public Management theory as the administrative tool for implementing major changes in public administration. This neo-liberal restructuring assigns a key role to the third sector as an agent of the state in the production and delivery of essential health and social services, including settlement services. The community-based service providers are deliberately underfunded, supposedly to allow the public to choose which services to support through their charitable giving and voluntary activities (Evans & Shields, 2005). Government gains greater control in specifying outputs and controlling spending. Contract funding also supposedly brings the rigours of a business or private-sector approach to perceived service inefficiencies among nonprofit organizations (Eakin, 2001). The whole system also depends on new "partnerships," which are not true alliances, but rather alternate funding and service delivery relationships, the terms and conditions of which are dictated largely by the terms of funding contracts. In fact in this new management and political framework, advocacy has come increasingly to be considered as special-interest activity not to be encouraged through taxpayer dollars. In such an environment, many community-based agencies fear that advocacy initiatives by their organizations may be detrimental to their chances of winning government contracts.

It is also essential to recognize that this new system is not working. It is not working for the settlement sector or for the newcomers they serve; nor is it working for Canadian nonprofit service agencies as a whole. Research by Scott (2003) has shown that this new funding regime is creating instability, service gaps, and a general diversion of precious human resources from service planning and delivery to irrational administrative burdens. Further, Eakin (2004) has demonstrated empirically that government contract funding for social services does not even pay the full costs of actual service delivery, much less the general costs for volunteer training and development and community development and education that are vital to the mission of community-based agencies. In the US Salamon and O'Sullivan (2004) have shown that nonprofit agencies are adapting and surviving in the new funding regime at the cost of reduced services to the most vulnerable clients, loss of autonomy, mission drift and reduced advocacy, and deteriorating working conditions for agency staff.

For community-based settlement providers, the effects of the new funding regime are compounded by the negative effects of nearly two decades of government downloading and social service freezes and cutbacks. This naturally creates increasing service demands on community agencies, including settlement agencies; and this effect is further multiplied by the deteriorating economic conditions of recent immigrants and the geographic

shift of newcomers from the traditional urban core to underserved suburbs. It does not require much imagination, therefore, to conclude that this situation is untenable. We know that community-based social service providers, including settlement service agencies, are largely dependent on government funding (Eakin, 2001; Scott, 2003; Richmond & Shields, 2004a, 2004b). We also know that successful settlement outcomes are largely determined by the existence of a healthy social service infrastructure (Reitz, 1995, 1998). The new funding regime even compromises the possibility of alternative funding for settlement-related services. Why should non-government funders such as community charities like the United Way and private and public foundations contribute to community agencies if their funds only subsidize the refusal by federal and provincial funders to pay the full costs of contracted services rather than going to new initiatives corresponding to the mission and mandate of these alternative funders?

The situation is further complicated by the prevailing confusion perhaps deliberate in the interpretation of accountability (Chambon & Richmond, 2001). Accountability requirements continue to multiply in the community-based service sector with the imposition of the new funding regime. Service providers generally recognize the need for appropriate forms of administrative accountability and the value of monitoring systems that contribute to evaluation of program outcomes. But the continual multiplication of the volume and complexity of systems of administrative accountability does not provide program evaluation; program evaluation by its nature requires a macro perspective and a commitment of expertise beyond the mandate and resources of a single program or agency. Nor is administrative accountability a substitute for public accountability with respect to the goals and standards of publicly funded services. The current focus on agency accountability seems intended to protect the funding bureaucrats from allegations of scandal and to deflect public debate away from a consideration of government responsibility for effective settlement services.

There is a grudging but growing recognition in Canadian public policy circles that settlement services are an essential component of our general health and social services. There is little recognition to date, however, that the settlement sector and other community-based service providers are the victims of a failed experiment in neo-liberal funding policies. Although Canadians have largely succeeded during the past two decades in defending the health and education sectors against the threat of major funding cuts and eventual privatization, a host of other vital services have been crippled by funding freezes, cutbacks, and restructuring. Along with settlement, examples include social housing, child care, services for abused

women, employment programs for excluded groups, equity and anti-racist programs, and community development initiatives. It is no coincidence that these sectors are those in which community-based agencies deliver vital services to the most vulnerable in our society, including recent immigrants. In these sectors the problems multiply through a perverse kind of interaction, with the clients experiencing more general problems due to growing poverty and cutbacks in income support, the agencies coping with limited and restrictive funding, and the staff labouring under increasingly exploitative conditions (Evans et al., 2005). Just as the bottom end of the labour market has grown in Canada in the past decades, so has the system of social services developed as a kind of two-tiered system. For the community-based settlement sector this combination of a bi-polar labour market and a bi-polar service system poses a real and present danger of its institutionalization as a kind of second-class, marginalized service system for Canada's excluded and largely visible-minority recent immigrants.

Let us be clear that to critique the debilitating effects of the new funding regime on the Canadian community services sector in general and the settlement sector in particular is not to argue for the status quo in terms of models of service delivery. There is no lack of alternative perspectives on which to draw. The necessity of autonomy and capacity for advocacy in community-based service organizations, for example, has been emphasized by such diverse sources as Creese (1998) and Canada West Foundation (2000, 1999). In Quebec the community sector including settlement providers has had significant success in institutionalizing policies that protect its autonomy and provide a more positive framework for negotiating government funding (Caillouette, 2004; Gouvernement de Quebec, 2001). Coalitions of immigrant voices like PROMPT (2005) are proposing new models of settlement that emphasize the assets of newcomers and the relationship between human capital, social capital, and social citizenship. The Canadian federal government itself has subsidized and promoted broad consultation through the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI), which has led to more progressive funding principles (Owen, 2001). But these new funding principles have no enforcement mechanisms and few champions in the ranks of the civil service where nonprofit-government relationships are forged into practical working relationships. The reality is that as long as our federal and provincial governments remain committed to further implementation of the contract funding regime, the possibility of more progressive models of settlement service delivery will be blocked.

These are clearly issues of public policy in Canada, a country that depends on the benefits of immigration and the delivery of vital health and



social service organizations by government-funded community agencies. Unfortunately, the legitimate concerns of community agencies have received little serious public attention to date. However, this may be changing with the recent flurry of protest over the devastating effects of recent initiatives by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) in further institutionalizing the new funding regime. The loss of funds for many established agencies with proven records of performance in job creation for newcomers and other Canadians, and impending closure for some, led to an unprecedented public outcry (Lewis, 2005). In the words of Frances Lankin, President and Chief Executive Officer of the United Way of Greater Toronto,

The new process for allocating contracts may be putting the interests of clients at risk. Many of the agencies that have historically provided these services are multi-service agencies, providing a range of community supports.... It is also worth noting that the Government of Canada depends on a viable network of community agencies to deliver a range of HRSDC and other federally-sponsored programs. This sector is increasingly destabilized by the implementation of these changes; not simply through the potential loss of these programs, but also through the increasingly onerous requirement for the preparation of proposals.... Responding to RFPs is a drain on community agencies and diverts resources from community programs.... I would note that the implementation of the new directives contradicts many of the provisions of the Code of Good Funding Practice developed by the Voluntary Sector Initiative. (correspondence with the Honourable Joe Volpe, Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, December 15, 2004, quoted with permission)

### **The European Experience**

European countries are experiencing similar demographic changes to those in Canada and looking more closely at the potential benefits of increased economic immigration (Roseveare & Jorgensen, 2004). With the growing international exchange of experiences promoted by the Metropolis Project, it is only natural that our European colleagues might be interested in the Canadian experience with respect to the potential role of community-based

organizations, including ethno-specific groupings in the direct provision of settlement services.

Nevertheless, although NGOs play differing roles in various European countries with respect to community organizing and anti-racist and equity advocacy, they have not generally been involved in the direct provision of settlement services (Penninx, 2003).<sup>1</sup> It would appear, rather, that in European countries where there is an existing capacity for autonomous community organization by immigrant-based agencies, the potential energies of these voices are being increasingly restricted by a new funding regime that restricts advocacy and promotes limited government-mandated services (Rossi, Uitemark, & van Houtum, 2004). This suggests that the dialogue with our European colleagues should focus more on the contradictions associated with state support of immigrant community associations involved in either policy advocacy or settlement support and less on promoting a romantic and idealized model of Canadian government-NGO collaboration in the provision of settlement services.

In Europe in the past few years as well, the public discourse has become increasingly polarized between pro- and anti-immigrant positions. Furthermore, this public debate is increasingly associated with a questioning of the benefits or indeed the legitimacy of the kind of multiculturalism that has been a fundamental component of Canadian immigration and settlement policies. This debate was, of course, highlighted and intensified by the large-scale protests (or riots) in France in fall 2005.

We would agree with commentators like de Beer (2005), Kumove (2005), and Siddiqui (2005) who analyzed the French riots as rooted in the persistence of *social exclusion* rather than some alleged failure of multiculturalism. As these and other commentators noted, the so-called immigrants protesting in France were the second- and third-generation descendants of mainly non-European newcomers, recruited largely for cheap labour; and they were protesting severe and persistent problems in areas like employment and housing. Above all, these protestors were highlighting their failure to achieve actual rather than purely formal equality as citizens, as revealed by the terminology used to describe them.

Some historical context is important in this regard. In the aftermath of World War II, Europe beyond the boundaries of Turkey and contemporary Russia (with the notable exception of the former Yugoslavia) had been organized into largely ethnically homogeneous states. Part of this had been accomplished by the Nazi-organized slaughter of Jews and other groups such as Roma people (or Gypsies), with active and passive collaboration in both Eastern and Western European countries. Other massive forced

migrations were imposed throughout Eastern Europe by the victorious Red Army. The further displacement of millions of persons in Western Europe classified as either refugees or displaced persons was organized first by the Allied armies and later by the aid agencies of the fledging United Nations (Judt, 2005). Since then immigration to Europe has mainly consisted of refugees and “temporary” or “guest” workers. The prevailing notion was that these people would eventually return to their country of origin, and policies of cultural retention and limited citizenship rights were developed and applied accordingly.

Certainly, therefore, we can see the recent protests in France as a wake-up call not only for our European colleagues, but also for Canada with its growing problems of social exclusion of immigrants and the racialization of poverty. However, in our view, it is dangerous to make facile comparisons between the European and Canadian experiences, particularly with regard to the alleged failure of multiculturalism. Canada is facing serious problems in the application of its policies of multiculturalism and progressive settlement policies delivered in partnership between government and community agencies. In Europe, it would appear, these policies have not yet been tested through large-scale and persistent implementation as prevailing state policy.

### **Conclusions and Policy Implications**

At least three important forces are at work behind the problems we identify in this overview of the contradictions and challenges in NGO-government relations and the delivery of settlement services to Canada’s newcomers. One aspect is a crisis of settlement policy rooted in the lack of an integrated public policy approach to the second stage of immigrant settlement, particularly the growing difficulties of newcomer labour market integration. A second aspect is the negative effects of the new funding regime on community-based social service providers, particularly settlement agencies. A third aspect is the alarming trend toward a second-tier and second-class system of health and social services for the most excluded members of Canadian society, including recent newcomers. All these factors are related, and all must be addressed as urgent matters of public policy. Because most recent newcomers to Canada are visible minorities, the resolution of our current problems in settlement is essential to the meaningful implementation of multiculturalism in terms of equity, anti-racism, and genuine social inclusion.

Policy reform in these areas depends on the active involvement of community agencies and their government funders. Settlement agencies must turn their attention to the need for *better funding* rather than simply demanding *more funding*. Concretely, this means stable and long-term funding, full recovery of administrative and operational costs, reasonable and efficient systems of administrative accountability, and a real community voice in the development of responsive and proactive settlement service programming. With this kind of focus, community-based service providers can rebuild their capacity for independent advocacy and restore their autonomy as legitimate community voices. Other concerned parties, including non-government funders, must address these concerns as vital issues of public policy. Above all, federal and provincial governments in Canada need to address the negative effects of the new funding regime as an urgent issue of *public accountability*.

New models of settlement service delivery must be addressed, but the success of any new model depends in large part on the expertise and resources of our community-based service providers. It does no service to our international colleagues to continue to promote the Canadian model of government-NGO service collaboration when this partnership is in crisis. New solutions to the challenge of settlement in Canada will require new research, new policies, and new alliances among the host of government and non-government providers of settlement services. The issues are complex and difficult, but the starting point in developing solutions must be the recognition of the true nature of the problems.

#### Note

- 1 These observations are also partly based on discussions between Ted Richmond and various Swedish government, academic and NGO representatives in spring 2003 during an exchange in Sweden on settlement experiences.

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