

## **Settling on Austerity: ISAs, Immigrant Communities and Neoliberal Restructuring**

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**ABSTRACT:** Immigrant Serving Agencies (ISAs) have long been at the centre of the settlement and integration of newcomer populations in Canada. They provide a community-based approach to settlement through nonprofit organizations rooted in the communities they serve, a workforce and volunteers drawn largely from immigrant populations, and a value system and voice reflective of the client base. This has been critical to fostering the ‘warmth of the welcome’ for newcomers that has made Canadian immigrant integration so successful in an internationally comparative context. This system however is under increasing challenge from austerity and neoliberal restructuring. The pressures include funding cutbacks, loss of ISA autonomy, and a general destabilization of nonprofit service provider organizations. This paper examines the impact of the challenges of government austerity and neoliberal policy for the ISAs and immigrant communities, and considers the prospects for restoring the leadership role of ISAs in providing successful integration through appropriate settlement services.

**KEYWORDS:** Settlement Services; Immigrants; Neoliberalism; Nonprofits; Permanent Austerity; Advocacy

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## Introduction

This paper examines the state of immigrant settlement services delivered by nonprofit providers in the current period of government imposed austerity. Social supports to immigrant newcomers to assist in the settlement process offered through locally based, but government funded nonprofit immigrant serving agencies (ISAs), have formed the core of the Canadian model of immigrant reception and integration fostering a more welcoming setting for new arrivals. This is a model that has been regarded as a ‘best practice’ approach to newcomer settlement harnessing the place-based human resources of nonprofit agencies rooted in the communities where immigrants settle and enabled by the funding support of higher tiered governments (Richmond and Shields 2005). Immigrant settlement supports have come to form an important component of the Canadian welfare state which is noteworthy given the continued importance that annual recruitment of large numbers of immigrant settlers play in the country’s economic and social development. Canada’s active support for immigrant settlement stands in marked contrast to its southern neighbor which has long embraced a hands-off laissez-faire approach to newcomer settlement (Shields and Bauder 2016). On the larger international scale Canada remains a leader in settlement programming and the country most identified for positive settlement practices (Shields et.al 2016).

Settlement services cover a broad range of activities required by immigrants in the often challenging settlement process, including basic orientation to Canadian society services, language training, labour market access supports, housing assistance and other specialized programs centered on immigrant needs. These services are important for “supporting immigrants to make the smooth transitions necessary to be able to more fully participate in the economy and society” (Shields, et.al, 2016: 4) including the achievement of full citizenship. Hence, settlement supports are more encompassing than just those suited to meet the immediate short-term needs of newcomers but also embrace supports directed at serving longer-term integration goals.

Additionally, the Canadian approach to settlement is characterized as two-way-street between immigrants and Canadian society (Tolley 2011), where each adjusts and changes in a dialectal process of integration and accommodation. These adjustments in practice, however, take place far more on the newcomer end than that of the host society. Still it is more than just symbolically significant that the approach to settlement is not an assimilationist dialogue. The multicultural foundations of modern Canadian society and citizenship are an important part of this more cosmopolitan understanding of immigration which stands in contrast to the narrower American melting pot which suggests an assimilation of immigrant cultures into a single American identity (Shields and Bauder 2015: 18-19). The Canadian model of immigrant settlement does, however, require a more engaged state, financially and legislatively, supporting settlement programming and providing public policies like multiculturalism and anti-racism initiatives to promote diversity, openness and inclusion.

It should be noted that support from family, friends and other private means is still the dominant source of ‘informal’ settlement support for immigrant newcomers in Canada. However, ‘formal’ settlement supports by governments in Canada are substantive and important both materially and symbolically. Significantly, the Federal Government, the largest state funder, spends close to \$1 billion on settlement programming (Levitz 2015). As well, the state’s material commitment to settlement sends a message of official welcome and inclusion to immigrant newcomers. The diminishing of state supports for settlement, both quantitatively and qualitatively, is negatively felt by immigrants.

Our understanding of the current state of settlement service supports in Canada is, however, limited. A previously widely cited study of ISAs and state restructuring by Richmond and Shields (2004b) is more than ten years old and predates the official adoption of an austerity agenda embraced by Canadian governments in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis (Laforest 2013). In Canada, moreover, the last decade has

seen major changes to immigration policies and regulations pushed aggressively forward by an ideologically driven Conservative government (Root, et.al 2015) which held office in Ottawa until recently. These changes have largely been documented and often subject to critical analysis (Alboim and Cohl 2012; Barrass & Shields 2015; Choudry and Smith 2016; Forier and Dufour 2016; Zhu 2016), but in the current period there has been relatively little attention paid to the impact of such changes on ISAs.

### **Approach**

We seek to address this gap through a critical review of the literature on immigrant settlement in Canada and by placing the current period in the context of past developments. As such we are able to document both continuity as well as change in the settlement service sector. More substantively we employ the findings from key informant qualitative interviews with Ontario-based experts<sup>4</sup> who have been working in various capacities in the field, including those from ISAs. These were conducted to help uncover current conditions, experiences and policy trends impacting ISAs and immigrant settlement. Some dozen in depth semi-structured interviews were conducted for this paper, lasting up to an hour in length. We asked about experiences, insights and observations on how the sector has changed, what impact this has had and how agencies and other players have responded. While all the persons interviewed were asked the same general questions, the interview process was loosely structured, to provide opportunities for dialogue and expression of concerns outside of our initial framework. For purposes of confidentiality the identities of those interviewed have been kept anonymous and thus the interview content is identified in general terms only. Detailed notes were taken during the interviews and important information and developments were documented and major themes that

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<sup>4</sup> This component of the research was undertaken by the community-based researchers Sophia Lowe and Ted Richmond. They followed standard ethics based interview protocols and obtained interview consent from all participants.

emerged identified. We were able to substantiate the findings from these interviews by checking them against interview material from a number of other studies which probed individuals involved with the immigrant settlement sector which also covered other parts of English Canada.<sup>5</sup> What we uncovered in our interviews very closely paralleled perspectives from these other studies giving us confidence in our findings and their general applicability within English Canada. The interviews also offer some new details and perspectives on trends and developments identified in the literature. The interview voices and specific experiences and observations are, of course, based out of the Greater Toronto Area and Ontario.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the community-based research team members, Lowe and Richmond, have extensive work histories related to the settlement sector in various capacities. Their experiences and insights, in effect, as participant observers, contributed much to a grounded understanding and analysis of the state of the settlement sector. In this paper we provide an assessment on ISAs and the immigrant settlement sector based on these insights, the literature and a detailed report on our interview findings.

### **Austerity and Settlement Services: Neoliberal Restructuring of Social and Human Supports**

The austerity agenda has targeted social sources of government spending for deep cuts. Senior levels of government have made use of the

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<sup>5</sup> John Shields over the past years has been engaged in a number of SSHRC funded collaborative research projects that have been examining nonprofit service provision including settlement services. In all, over 100 individuals involved with the immigrant settlement sector in English Canada were interviewed or engaged as part of focus groups. The insights expressed in these encounters were consistent with the broad themes, experiences and sentiments identified in our set of key informant interviews.

<sup>6</sup> Quebec's system of settlement support differs from the other provinces as the Federal Government provides Quebec with special funding for it to establish and run its own settlement and immigrant recruitment programs that are specifically centred on the Quebec francophone reality.

local, as made evident in the case of the UK's Big Society initiative (Szreter and Ishkanian 2012), to carry forth their downsizing pro-market neoliberal program. Nonprofit service delivery organizations are the quintessential community-based human service bodies. They primarily arise out of, are largely staffed by, and are based within the local communities they serve both geographically and in regards to population groups. Significantly, austerity bent governments see cuts and restructuring of supports to these organizations as less publicly visible and as being easily absorbed through the use of more voluntary sources of labour and internal efficiencies – ‘doing more with less’ – to make up for lost government revenues (Baines et.al 2015). The retreat from government sources of support, according to neoliberal logic, will free up the space and energies of local philanthropic interests and volunteers which have been displaced by ‘excessive’ government involvement in social provision.

The reality is that austerity, although undertaken under different labels, is nothing new to the settlement sector; it has faced, in large measure, a state of ‘permanent austerity’ and neoliberal restructuring since the end of the 1980s. The restructuring of social provision has occurred under the direction of New Public Management (NPM). NPM has served as a transmission belt used to impose neoliberal governance and practice models into the nonprofit service sector (Evans and Shields 1998; Evans, Richmond and Shields 2005).

While greater detail regarding the neoliberal restructuring of nonprofit service provision can be found in Richmond and Shields (2004b) and Shields and Evans (1998) the essence of the process has involved:

- Services and care previously provided by the state being increasingly downloaded onto local government, non-profit providers, communities and families. This process is referred to as “responsibilization” as the state relinquishes many of its duties shifting the responsibility increasingly onto individuals and other bodies (Kelly and Caputo 2011: 11).

- A hollowing out of the welfare state, as the shell of many social programs and policy remain, but their scope and reach is greatly diminished (Jessop 2014). This hollowing is accompanied with appeals to ‘community’ and the values of charity and volunteering to pick up the slack left by a retreating state. While welfare provision has long involved a mixed social economy where state, market, nonprofits and family have shared responsibilities for social provision, under neoliberalism there has been a dramatic shift away from state responsibility toward other actors (Valverde 1995).
- Increased use of Alternate Service Delivery (ASD) involving reduced services, restricted access and nonprofit delivery agents as key elements in the implementation of neoliberalism. Even where the state still provides funding for services this is now to be largely delivered by third party actors, and in particular ‘cheap’ nonprofit service providers. Costs are more easily controlled in such provision, especially with reduced labour expenses and with the ability of the state to rather invisibly cut supports given the distance between and ‘invisibility’ of the funding for and delivery of services in such arrangements (Baines et.al 2014).
- NPM commands the adoption of ‘business models’, ‘lean production’ and a narrow focus on ‘efficiency’ by delivery agencies to receive state funding for services. This promotes one size fits all approaches to delivery that favours measurable quantity over quality, and rigidity over flexibility in the way services are provided (Cunningham and James 2011). Larger multi-service agencies are better positioned to compete in such an environment over smaller and ethno-specific ISAs.
- Funding of ASD, moreover, moves away from longer term more flexible block grants to short-term, competitively-based program financing tied to narrow and strict audit-oriented accountability mechanisms. This works to tie the hands of organizations who must adhere to controlling funding rules that only narrowly support programs and not the organizations who deliver them, and results in time consuming and costly reporting procedures (Eakin 2007).

- The end result is a marketized model of *thinned out* and *leaned out* services and a system that does not constitute a true partnership between the state and non-profit service providers but a relationship that is dominated by the funder. In this model the state is able to control non-profit delivers at a distance through their funding and accountability arrangements, a process Shields and Evans have termed ‘centralized decentralization’ (1998: 13).
  - There is a greatly diminished place for advocacy by non-profit providers. In the past community-based non-profit agencies were seen, and even encouraged, to be the voices of more marginalized groups they served. Often nonprofits were even provided with funding by the state to engage in an inclusionary advocacy role (Evans, Richmond and Shields 2005). However, under NPM advocacy has come to be viewed very negatively and nonprofits are reduced to purely client service role. In fact, the funding model has come to produce a strong ‘advocacy chill’ in the non-profit sector, one particularly felt by ISAs under Harper (Evans and Shields 2014).
  - A system where nonprofit provider accountability to the funder comes to trump all other forms of accountability. One of the unique features of the non-profit sector is that its organizations have multiple accountabilities – to the communities they serve, their governance boards; to members, staff and volunteers; to the general public; and to funders. But under NPM accountability is overwhelmingly directed one way, upward to funders (Richmond and Shields 2004a).
  - The delivery of settlement services through non-profit bodies, of course, pre-dates NPM.

What changed with NPM for ISAs is reduced autonomy for providers, the tight control of programming by the state, a narrowed role in society, and funding instability (Evans, Richmond and Shields 2005).

As will be brought to light through our key informants, this model of state funding and control has had some very negative impacts on ISAs’ ability to serve the immigrant community. It must be noted that the process and impact of NPM/neoliberal structuring has been uneven. The

points identified above are consistent with the longer term trends in transformation of state-nonprofit service provision (Almog-Bar and Young 2016). But as a political project neoliberalism has taken time to implement, encountered practical and political opposition which at times has slowed and even set back the direction of change as evidenced in the push back against neoliberal directions in policy in the wake of the Harper Government's defeat.

### **The Changing Landscape of Immigration and Migration Policy in Canada**

The past number of decades witnessed changes in a neoliberal direction to immigration policy emphasizing greater economic class immigration focused on high human capital, stronger border control and security measures, and restraint in settlement funding (Shields 2004). However, it is the past decade that has seen a dizzying pace of change in Canadian immigration rules and public policy. This situation is well captured by Alboim and Cohl (2012):

“The pace and scope of change in Canada’s immigration system in recent years leaves one breathless. From 2008 to July 1, 2012, the federal government has made changes to every aspect of immigration policy, including the way in which reform is undertaken, and more changes are proposed. While some of the recent changes are positive, many are problematic.”

The changes implemented under the Harper Government constituted a major departure from the past breaking the all-party consensus which had existed around the direction of immigration policy (Barrass and Shields 2015; Dorbrowolsky 2012). In brief, immigration policy has been reshaped to:

- Align more closely to neoliberal and austerity policy directions;
- Make immigrants and their families more responsible for their own settlement and immigration, thus reducing the state’s commitment to settlement supports;

- Focus very heavily on the immediate narrow economic benefits of immigration;
- Restrict family unification and reduce refugee intake in favour of economic class immigrants;
- Greatly increase the use of vulnerable temporary foreign workers to ‘flexibly’ fill the labour ‘needs’ of employers;
- Devolve settlement service responsibilities to sub-national organizations and nonprofit providers;
- Restructure national welfare states to reduce services and restrict newcomer access to such supports;
- Tighten the rules around immigration access;
- Promote and implement racialized restrictions, directed primarily at Muslims, in the name of security; and
- Promote the notion of so-called ‘good’ vs ‘bad’ immigrants as a basis for justifying funding cuts for immigrant support and the greater restrictions on who gets in (Barrass and Shields 2015; Lo et.al 2015; Anderson 2013, 2014; Arat-Koc 1999, 2012; Marwah et.al 2013; Alboin and Cohl 2012; Dobrowolsky 2012; Shapaizman 2010).

In this austere political climate the so-called ‘warmth of the immigrant welcome’ that Canada had become so well known for (Reitz 1999) has definitely cooled.

With the election of the Liberal Government in Ottawa in late 2015 there has been a turn away from the more extreme changes of the Harper era, restoring a more balanced approach to immigration recruitment and greater supports for newcomers, especially refugees. In this regard the non-linear trajectory of immigrant settlement policy is revealed. The Liberal Party, it is important to note, did run in the election on an anti-austerity platform; it spoke instead of the need for public investments (O'Toole 2015). They also promoted the idea of evidence-based approaches to policy determination turning away from Harper's more ideological approach to policymaking (Griffith 2013). The restoration of the mandatory Census is one prominent manifestation of

this. On the issue of immigration and security, however, the Liberals, as manifested in Bill C-51, have retained the bulk of Harper's strict securitization measures (Mia 2016). While it will take some time before the full direction of the Liberal Government's immigration policy is revealed, at this point it is fair to say that it constitutes something of a mixed outcome representative of modest progressive change as well as measures of continuity with the Harper period. Given the timing of our interviews they are more reflective of the impacts on the settlement sector during the Harper period.

Our key informant interviews indicate that many of the changes to immigration policy and programming under the Conservatives coincided with changes in the labour market, resulting in more competition for increasingly precarious employment amongst newcomers (See: Lewchuck 2015; and Gottfried, et.al 2016). Despite these changes our informants tell us that there is still an overall expectation on the part of government funders that immigrants will settle quickly and into good jobs, even with a sluggish economy and labour market.

Respondents recognized that since the 1990s, immigration policy shifted from thinking of immigrants as citizens with families, to thinking of immigrants as workers – economic units, and this was particularly pronounced in the Harper period. As a result, most immigrant-serving agencies shifted their language and culture of how they work with immigrants – for example, they began calling them clients and began focusing on narrow measurable economic outcomes of success as demanded by funders as part of reporting requirements.

According to respondents, the focus on economic immigration became more pronounced under the Harper government, with a move towards increasing numbers of migrants in Canada on a temporary basis – Temporary Foreign Workers and International Students (Hannan et.al 2016; Lowe 2010). These policy changes, coupled with tightening restrictions and regulations for immigrants and their families, took place relatively quickly and created burdens not only for newcomers but also for settlement agencies. Staff struggled to serve a growing population of

migrants who are ineligible for many services and have varying and unique needs. Services for different immigrant groups, including specialized and knowledgeable employment support for highly skilled immigrants, can be difficult to find and programs are located across a variety of agencies. This makes providing the kind of wrap-around services that agencies tend to support challenging. As well, it has been very difficult to keep up with the required knowledge of all the regulatory changes and rules in order to advise migrants appropriately. And ISAs, in the spirit of austerity, have been compelled to address these increased and more complex needs to settle immigrants in their local communities in a greatly restricted funding environment.

Respondents noted that more recent changes to immigration policy not only have favoured economic immigrants, but also have changed the mix of economic immigrants. For example, new policies increased official language requirements to come to Canada and introduced the Express Entry system promoting employer directed recruitment. Some informants noted that these changes have negatively impacted the diversity of Canada's immigration program. Others emphasized that the underlying presumption in all these changes is that migrants should be successful, without requiring as much settlement service support. This has contributed to devaluing and underfunding the entire settlement sector. In addition, some respondents noted that the ever-present challenge of marketing settlement services and their relevance to immigrants are more pronounced. One person noted that "immigrants [are] not seeing immigrant serving agencies as valuable and want to go to mainstream organizations."

### **The State-ISA Funding Regime**

Funding for community-based settlement services is limited and unstable, and this is widely acknowledged by our key informants. This is highly problematic for ISAs given their heavy dependence on government funding, which constitutes 85% or more of their budgets (Eakin 2007, Baines et.al 2014). The move away from core funding over

the last decades to short-term project-funding from all funders has created additional instability and competition across the sector. The general pattern over the past decades has been funding restraint. In Ontario substantive cuts to settlement goes back at least to the mid-1990s under the Harris Government, including its closure of immigrant Welcome Houses and removing funding for newcomer children's programs (Omidvar and Richmond 2003; Zhu 2016: 145). The sector has never enjoyed the benefits of stable and consistent funding. But not only has the sector been chronically underfunded; periodically, a considerable amount of money has been injected into the sector, but without a long term vision or plan.

In 2006, the Canada-Ontario Immigration Act (COIA) negotiated between Liberal Governments in Ottawa and Ontario contributed to a substantial initial investment in the overall Ontario settlement sector where the majority of newcomers arrived. Many agencies grew their staffing and programming in response to more funding. However, one respondent noted that this funding was like building the sector out of a "house of cards" – there was little structural funding or planning to withstand a withdrawal of these funds later on. At the end of the COIA agreement under the Conservative Harper Government, there were massive cuts to agencies in the sector. While "the settlement sector did what it could" in these circumstances, many respondents noted that it never fully recovered from the post-COIA claw backs. One respondent noted that the sector "expanded everything, and then it was all cut."

COIA funding inundated the sector with new opportunities. Agencies hired people, grew programs and services, opened up new centres and small ethno-specific spaces were boosted. Through COIA, three times more funding was pushed into the sector in Ontario. This allowed additional programs and collaborations like Job Search

Workshop (JSW), HOST program<sup>7</sup> and Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) to expand. Further, agencies grew their human resources role and their capacity to offer solid employment, which attracted skilled workers and emphasized professionalism. COIA was also a milestone in terms of collaboration, with formal tripartite agreements involving the three orders of government (federal-provincial-city). Respondents noted that COIA allowed the government and sector to “collaborate and design something systematically – not just react.” Regions were looking at service delivery based on landings data and areas with fewer services and this period saw the launch of the tripartite welcome centre hub model.

According to one respondent, when COIA ended, settlement services in Ontario lost approximately \$200 million. This impacted all aspects of service delivery and the capacity of agencies to do the work they had grown over the COIA funding period. Further, the strong partnerships built between the three levels of government were not maintained. Instead, according to respondents, squabbles over the end of the agreement and funding resulted in further strained relations. Following the end of COIA, many agencies were forced to lay off staff, salaries were flat-lined, services and programs were closed or limited, and some agencies were pushed to shut down. Respondents shared that employment across the settlement sector became more precarious, with increases in the instances of part-time, contract and seasonal employment.

Since the end of COIA, the sector as a whole has not experienced growth. Financial accountability became CICs most important marker of

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<sup>7</sup> The Host program is aimed at assisting immigrant newcomers to better meet the challenges of moving to a new country. The program focuses on using Canadian volunteers to help immigrants learn about available services, practice English and French language, develop work related contacts and to engage in their community (Canadian Newcomer Magazine 2016).

agency success, moving ever-further from examining service impact. Some agencies continued to grow and expand services, but these are largely multi-service agencies and those relying on a more diverse revenue streams. Smaller agencies, organizations and programs that rely on federal funding continued to be heavily impacted by a lack of resources. Additional federal cuts continued during the final years of the Harper government. These impacted a number of collaborative programs, capacity-building work, and smaller agencies – largely in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The HOST program and the JSW program were closed, as well as 13 agencies in the GTA. For other agencies, staff and programs were lost and many agencies incurred huge deficits, as CIC refused to pay for any severance for laid off employees. Program enhancements that were gained after years of advocacy were lost during the Harper years, such as summer language instruction programming and a significant reduction in child care services for newcomer program users.

In addition, there were further “nickel and dime” cutbacks that impacted agencies and the people they supported. These included restrictions to paying for any food or public transit tickets for clients, and further cuts to child-minding services and staff salaries. Additional budgetary restrictions and inflexibility were introduced. Surplus funding was clawed back, while deficits were absorbed by agencies. According to some respondents, these types of changes pushed some agencies to micromanage their budgets and carry significant debts over time. It is clear that ISAs have felt the full impact of neoliberal/austerity agenda, pushed to ‘do more with ever less’. Strict contract conditions and rigid accountability requirements work to limit client eligibility and greatly restrict what ISAs are able to spend on.

### **Accountability**

Respondents highlighted that strict contract conditions and funder accountability requirements have increased, without additional funding to support this work. This includes rigid accounting for all funds

used, how they are used and additional data and reporting on impact. Even the Federal Government's own Independent Blue Ribbon Panel on Grants and Contributions that looked at nonprofit accountability identified the system as dysfunctional, over burdensome and counter-productive for producing a rational and effective system of service delivery (Shields 2014: 271). During the Harper period the accountability burden increased. According to respondents, it used to be that reporting on how funds were used, as well as the relationship with funding officers, was more dynamic and responsive to needs within the community and for the agency. Now, as noted by all respondents, data collection and reporting to IRCC (then CIC) is very burdensome.

As one respondent put it, "accountability is always to the funder, not to the newcomer communities." This was identified as one of the most significant challenges for agencies, as IRCC funds the biggest portion of the settlement sector, but is considered the most disconnected from what is needed and what is going on. Further, there are no common indicators of success in settlement because success is defined differently across the sector (e.g., keeping doors open to all newcomers versus growing services and programs). One is responsive and accountable to funders; the other is responsive to community needs and sets the agenda.

Some respondents warned that without defining the value and impact of the sector as a whole, the sector would continue to be divided, and demonstrating the sector's impact to funders and the population at large would continue to be a challenge. One respondent said that the sector needs a strategic plan. Without this, there may continue to be competition, rather than collaboration, with smaller agencies and many important services being lost. Measuring impact in social services is a challenge (Cooper and Shumate 2016: 41-42). In a short-term project funding environment, planning, evaluation and measuring outcomes and impact are even more challenging for agencies. Coupled with limited funding, the higher demand to prove impact and value of programs is nearly impossible for organizations whose capacity, resources and experience are already compromised. Despite this, funders require

greater data on outcomes. According to many respondents, this is about creating and justifying further “efficiencies” in the system. For some services, such as employment, the focus on outcomes and outputs can drive the people served into precarious employment. In these instances, targets may be met for the agencies, but the achievement of good jobs, where skills and experience are used, is no longer the focus.

Respondents noted that the reporting burden – even for small grants – is significant. Funders expect more with less – and demand that it be measurable success and impact. Many organizations are dedicating significant resources to accessing grants and reporting to funders. This, according to many respondents, ties up limited resources that could be used to run programs and to serve people directly. Despite agreement that accountability and efficiency in service-delivery is important in the sector, respondents believe that the way organizations are held accountable is too burdensome and detracts from the value of their services. Accountability has been lifted off the government and put on agencies. Site visits and other mechanisms for funders to collect data and information about services are no longer common practice. Instead, agencies are required to prove everything that they do and report on it, with limited government or funder interface and knowledge of programming.

Changing accountability structures and greater dislocation between government funders and service agencies also further removes governments from on-the-ground issues and what matters in communities. This can have a profound impact on program and policy development, and lead to disjointed and illogical service delivery. A good example of this is funders requiring that all immigrant children accessing services through a program run in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) have permanent resident cards, directly contradicting the Toronto Access policy that the TDSB signed onto. Proper accountability and the ability to evaluate programs requires good will on the part of funders and non-profit agencies, dedicated resources, available expertise and meaningful dialogue. These are elements that are largely missing in

the current funding and accountability regime which is overly interested in hierarchical control and austere delivery of services.

### **Competition and Collaboration**

The current funding system in the settlement sector creates poor conditions for collaboration and capacity-building. According to respondents, there is greater competition amongst agencies, for an ever-smaller funding pot. One person noted that funders have a “divide and conquer” mentality and approach. For agencies, it is “quite tricky to build partnerships in this context.” Some noted that, in sub-sectors of the settlement sector, such as employment and refugee resettlement, there is less competition and better collaboration. This may be in part due to the interest and focus of government in these areas. There used to be funding for leadership development in the sector, as well support for professional development and capacity-building in the sector (Türegün 2016). With funders focused on programs and direct-services, the “soft-supports” such as coordination, collaboration, training and professional development struggle to get funding, despite their importance to build and sustain a strong sector and to offer coordinated services. Increasing competition for limited resources has contributed to the difficulty the sector has in coordinating, collaborating, sharing a common vision and fighting back together. Some organizations are struggling to “do it all” and better coordination would help achieve a common end-goal of supporting immigrants and refugees to successfully settle and succeed. Respondents said that they “can’t serve all immigrants and refugees” and that better collaboration and partnership is necessary.

### **Marginalizing the Sector**

Respondents believe that limited resources and uncertain funding have created increasingly precarious labour conditions within the settlement sector. Precarity concerns the lack of security and/or predictability, fostering vulnerability, instability, marginality and temporariness (Baines et.al 2014). Under-funding and lack of long-term

funding stability mean: employment insecurity; increased workloads (doing “more with less”); lack of promotion ladders; lower wages and minimal benefits; growth of unpaid and underpaid labour. Continual threats of defunding make ongoing settlement service operations ‘permanently temporary’. As well an employment structure of ‘permanent temporariness’ becomes embedded into the DNA of the sector (Cunningham et.al 2016; Shields 2014). Speaking in terms of funding and government support, one respondent highlighted that “organizations that serve marginalized groups are themselves marginalized.” Within the settlement sector, a number of respondents noted that the staff composition is largely immigrant- and female-dominated, and that agencies are not afforded the same support as other sub-sectors in the nonprofit community service sector. That many workers in the settlement sector are themselves immigrants from the very communities they service is an important link helping to keep ISAs close to immigrant clients. But it is also reflective of the problem faced by so many immigrant newcomers in that they become employed in lower waged and precarious employment (Gottfried et.al 2016; Preston 2010) a factor that marks ISA employment patterns (Baines et.al. 2014).

Despite this reality, respondents noted that there are greater demands for professionalization, but without adequate salaries or professional development opportunities within the sector (Türegün 2016). All respondents noted that there has been a significant reduction in funding available for professional development, networking and collaboration – for agencies, their staff and for umbrella groups. Noting the challenges of attracting and retaining good staff, one respondent noted that “the sector is not valuing critical roles,” largely as they cannot offer decent employment. Not all organizations are facing the same challenges. Larger, multi-service agencies or organizations with a diversity of revenue streams become organizations that can attract and retain the most talent, as they are better positioned to offer decent work conditions including pay, benefits and a measure of job security. For smaller organizations that are reliant on single-source government

funding, challenges with staff are often overwhelming. Funders are requiring additional competencies (such as multiple languages of communication), which results in organizations dividing one stable role into multiple part-time contracts. Respondents also noted a reduction in funding for summer LINC programs, limiting the availability of year-round employment. These circumstances lead to difficulties with filling positions and retaining qualified staff.

In cases where programs are cut and agencies are losing funding, there are direct job losses. In addition, some funders have refused to pay severance. This leaves organizations with legal obligations to pay severance, which incur greater debts. In these circumstances, any longer-term planning for agencies, including staffing, is close to impossible. Most funding is limited to three years and there have been significant cuts across the sector. The pressures on ISAs threaten their long-term viability and the well-being of the communities they serve. The ‘best value for the dollar’ approach of NPM creates a ‘race to the bottom’ for nonprofit agencies threatening their ability to deliver quality services and to survive as organizations (Cunningham and James 2011). As the social safety net erodes, marginalized populations turn to community service providers including ISAs for support – but the capacity to respond has been seriously eroded.

### **Diversity and Commitment of the Sector**

When asked about the greatest assets of the settlement sector, respondents shared that an engaged, passionate and committed workforce, as well as diversity within the sector itself are its greatest assets. People working in the sector feel that their work is “more than a job,” and shared that they love what they do. Many staff working in the settlement sector are themselves immigrants, which helps to keep services relevant to the communities they serve and supports strong linguistically- and culturally-relevant service delivery. Of course, the deep commitment to caring on the part of the sector’s workers is a double edged sword as it also becomes a force to bind them to their duties even

under exploitative conditions (Baines et.al 2014). Respondents also believe that the sector is nimble and flexible – and that organizations remain mission-driven, despite challenges with funder demands. This enables many of them to serve immigrants, regardless of their eligibility for federally-funded settlement services. Others highlighted a similar trend, saying that settlement services are responsive to community need, constantly innovating what is offered to best respond to current needs. However, some noted that the sector tends to be overly reactive, which results in less strategic planning and more chasing of funding dollars and demands. For some, this has made much of service planning and delivery less relevant to the needs of immigrants.

The settlement sector is very diverse. This is reflected by staff diversity within settlement agencies as well as by diversity across organizations and those working in this sphere. Respondents pointed out that the sheer number of agencies and actors involved in the settlement sector makes it difficult to clearly define. Those delivering settlement, employment and support services include: large multi-service agencies, municipal services, community health care clinics, legal clinics, ethno-specific agencies and other small niche agencies, employment agencies, programs within other service agencies, private sector services, post-secondary institutions and programs, and faith-based services. There are also umbrella agencies, think tanks, research centres and academic and community partnerships working across immigration issues and supporting aspects of the settlement sector.

Over the last ten years, respondents have seen many new players enter the immigration and settlement sector at large. Some noted that many so-called new players are in reality old players repackaged with buzz-words and social enterprise models. The corporate sector has taken up a larger role (Conference Board of Canada, Canadian Chamber of Commerce) and, according to some individuals, these organizations garner more respect than the nonprofit sector and its work. On public policy issues related to immigration, immigration lawyers are now some of the biggest advocates; however, respondents noted that lawyers have a

particular stake in issues. More recently, private citizens, constituent groups and neighbourhoods have banded together in growing numbers to support and fund refugee resettlement through private sponsorship. This has added another layer of diversity to the sector that serves immigrants and advocates on issues related to immigration and settlement. Wide spread civic engagement in refugee settlement promoted by the Syrian crisis has been an important development that has aided in strengthening the wider population's commitment to progressive immigration policies.

Most respondents count the diversity of the sector as a strength and an asset, noting how coordinated and networked the sector is – especially in the GTA. Others said the settlement sector was fractious and divided. This sentiment came across most strongly as respondents described how agencies under the NPM model compete amongst each other for limited funding, trying to distinguish themselves as unique, rather than collaborating and building common-ground with other agencies. To most, the Ontario Coalition of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) has played a strong role in unifying the sector – especially vis-à-vis communication and advocating on behalf of the sector. However, some respondents felt that the sector needed to better define its role and standardize a model of care in order to have common ways to demonstrate and measure success. Others felt that any pan-Canadian settlement vision needs to take a position in relation to issues such as equity, anti-racism and Aboriginal rights, rather than being defined exclusively in terms of service delivery.

### **Research, Policy and Advocacy**

All respondents believe that some funding autonomy is essential for genuine engagement in advocacy. For many, funding autonomy and, specifically, not being tied to RICC-funds, is a direct contributor to the ability to critique government policy and do advocacy work. Most noted that there is always an unequal power relationship with a funder – and when this is government, it is more complicated. This limits advocacy

and push-back. Many respondents believe the settlement sector is uniquely positioned to engage in public policy advocacy and to raise awareness on issues related to immigration and settlement. They are on the ground with immigrants and can bring individual issues and trends to a systemic level (See: De Graauw 2016). However, according to most respondents, the settlement sector on the whole, does not engage in much advocacy. One respondent noted that, when compared to other nonprofit social service sectors, the settlement sector is quiet and quite tame. For many, this lack of advocacy is related to a fear of losing funding.

Umbrella agencies, such as OCASI, and other coalitions, such as the Consortium of Agencies Serving Internationally-trained Persons (CASIP), play an important role in ensuring that the sector has “protected voices” when advocating. Respondents felt that their agencies could not lobby, but that advocacy could happen through these channels. Some noted that it is not difficult to advocate, but that this cannot be done in opposition; it can be done in “soft ways,” such as by engaging in planning tables, the national settlement council, working groups, boards and umbrella groups (Evans and Shields 2014). One respondent noted that “advocacy is also a good service” – helping to ensure that policies and politics align with community needs. However, others noted that the softer advocacy coming from agencies can be a form of self-promotion, reinforcing competition in the sector. Others noted that autonomous organizations, like foundations should be playing a more active role in both advocacy and funding advocacy work for agencies, which “can’t separate the political from issues.”

Recently, umbrella organizations are increasingly monitored and controlled. This, according to some respondents, is intended to restrict advocacy. OCASI, unlike many other umbrella agencies, has continued to speak out in defense of immigrants and the sector (Douglas 2016). However, some respondents felt that the advocacy efforts were not always strategic, and were too often reactive and overly focused on settlement sector funding. One respondent noted that in an advocacy

space, OCASI needs to support defining the sector first, in order to be able to best advocate for the sector's work. Another highlighted that advocacy can come directly from agencies themselves, "pushing back with funders and not taking everything as it comes."

Some organizations continue to advocate in public spaces, despite the "advocacy chill" produced and perpetuated by governments. Respondents noted that some small ethno-specific agencies continue to do valuable advocacy work and respond to local issues. Some of these organizations have been defamed for doing so; although many do not risk funding, they may risk revocation of charitable status. The fear of advocacy and speaking out, according to a number of respondents, has never been as severe as it was during the decade of Harper rule at the federal level. Even still, different actors and players have entered into these spaces to advocate for policy and program reforms. A key example was the direct advocacy and mobilizing of health care professionals, students and other activists around cuts to the Interim Federal Health Program for refugees. The formal settlement sector supported and participated in this movement, while the leadership came largely from others. Similarly, the recent Syrian refugee crisis brought forward a significant surge in public pressure and mobilization from faith-groups, community groups and private sponsorship groups. These groups have been vocal and have drawn important attention to a number of important areas, including the value of resettlement and diversity in Canada, the presence of a settlement sector and the inadequacy of many social supports currently in place.

When asked about the importance of research for the settlement sector, respondents noted that a growing body of research in this field has been vital to supporting service planning and advocacy. More, respondents noted how CERIS, Metropolis, Social Planning Toronto, the Maytree Foundation and other partnerships with researchers and academics, showed agencies that they "could get involved in research and help to define the agenda." Some noted that such collaborations have been important in helping the sector measure success, come into public

policy arenas and influence governments. In addition, some of the research that came from these collaborations built the capacity of agencies to undertake their own research and document, through evidence, local-level and neighbourhood challenges, service impact, and policy issues (Shields, et.al 2015). In a policy world where evidence and the ability to show results matter, research capacity can be a significant asset (Lum et.al 2016). Agencies that use research to build a strong case for their services, according to our key informants, appear to be enjoying greater access to varied funding streams. One respondent highlighted that research on the indicators of disadvantage and how settlement services are aligned and respond to this, would support both the work of the sector as a whole and the ability to convince others of the value in this work.

## Conclusion

ISAs have been an essential part of modern immigration settlement and integration in Canada. Their funding to deliver locally centred services for newcomers has been part of internationally recognized best practices approaches to immigrant reception. Active state support for settlement has in fact become an integral part of Canada's welfare system. However, the impacts of years of neoliberal restructuring of social provision and funding austerity has weakened the foundations of the settlement sector and worked to loosen the community-based ties as NPM 'reforms' imposed controls on ISA programing have bound nonprofit service delivery to funders over communities served. The relationship between ISAs and state funders has been an overly one directional controlling one, not a true partnership, with government setting all the rules. It has also served to in effect narrow the role of ISAs to simply that of service provider, marginalizing an advocacy function. The diversity of service delivery offered by nonprofit agencies has long been identified as one of the core strengths of the sector (Salamon 2015) but this asset has been weakened

under NPM given its preference to fund primarily large multiservice agencies.

At the heart of the ISA-government relationship is the model of funding developed under NPM. The imposition of a competitive short-term program-based financing tied to a rigid accountability framework, which replaced a more open ended block funding system, is the mechanism by which government is able to control those it funds and impose business-oriented management systems. Moreover, the instability of funding for ISAs and the endless pressures to lean service provision – ‘do more with less’ – has created tremendous precarity in the sector making forward planning very difficult. The key to reform, consequently, rests with the funding model (See: Shields 2014: 269-274). Funding needs to be longer-term and stable with more flexibility in terms of organizational discretion in spending. The accountability to funders needs to be less rigid and opened up to include accountability to communities served. Funders should not be in a position where they impose ‘advocacy chill’ on service providers. A funding system that recognizes the value of the diversity of the settlement sector and supports large multiservice agencies as well as small ethno-specific ISAs is important as it is this diversity which enables greater reach and a more flexible response to varying newcomer needs. A measure of ISA funding autonomy is essential for effective engagement with community and advocacy. ISAs ‘give voice’ to the communities they serve, and this is essential to making integration a two-way street. For too long the relationship between ISAs and their government funders has been top down, without real dialogue or true partnership. A mature and respectful relationship between funders and ISAs that values the services and the organizations that deliver them is critical to improving immigrant settlement and integration.

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