BIG ENOUGH/SMALL ENOUGH

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Smaller communities across the country now consider immigration one important way to develop their economic and social capacity. With a population of just over 400,000, Halifax is a small city on the national scale. It is also home to Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia, ISANS, which ranks nationally as one of the largest multi-service settlement agencies. Being a large immigrant settlement organization in a small city has given ISANS some unique advantages. This article discusses the advantages of being big enough and small enough in the immigrant settlement sector.

Les petites communautés du pays considèrent désormais l'immigration comme un moyen important de développer leur capacité économique et sociale. Halifax, avec une population d'un peu plus de 400 000 habitants, est une petite ville à l'échelle nationale. La ville abrite également l'ISANS (Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia), qui est l'une des plus grandes agences d'établissement multiservices à l'échelle nationale. Le fait d'être une grande organisation qui aide à l'établissement des immigrants dans une petite ville a procuré à l'ISANS des avantages uniques. Cet article traite des avantages d'être assez grand et assez petit dans le secteur de l'établissement des immigrants.

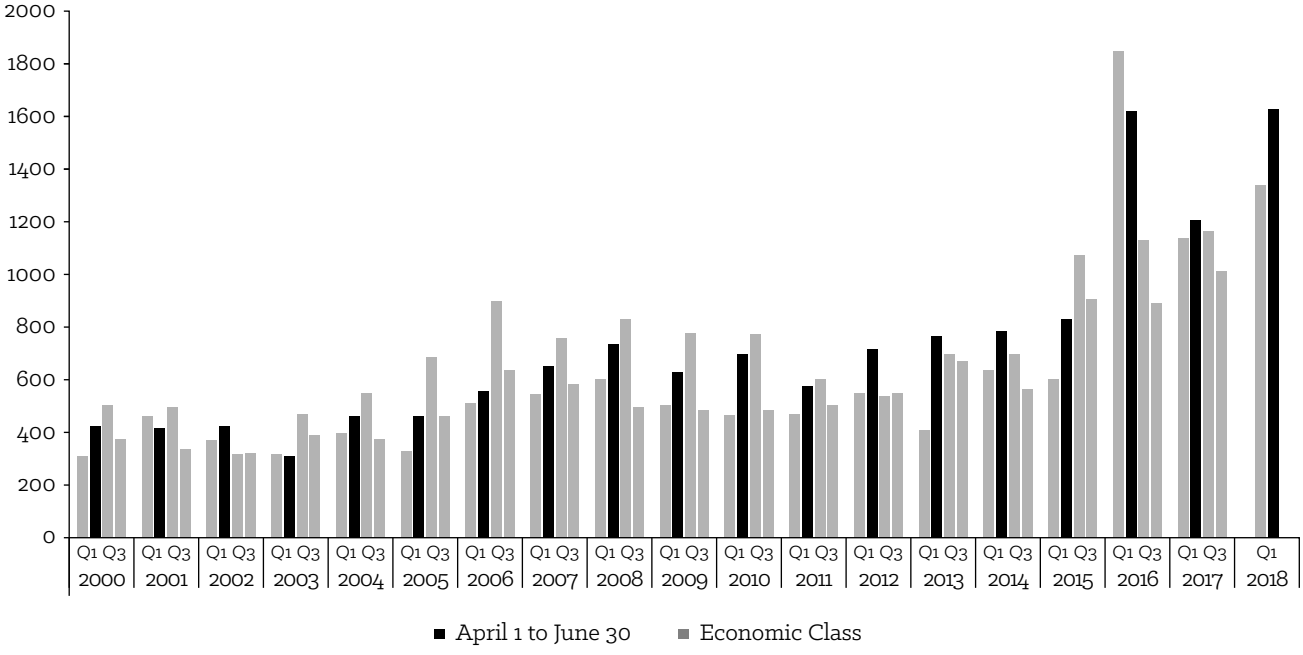
Since the introduction of the Provincial Nominee Programs in the late 1990s, provinces have had a clear role in immigrant selection and have been working to attract immigrants to smaller centres and rural areas. In 2001, Citizenship and Immigration Canada published a special study entitled *Towards a More Balanced Geographic Distribution of Immigrants* that reviewed the then emerging trend, which has now become well established in policy and practice across the country. Seven years later, a study by Andre Bernard of Statistics Canada (2008) reviewed this development and noted that immigrants often do better in smaller centres. Support for extending immigration beyond the largest cities has continued and has taken many forms. Smaller communities across the country now consider immigration one important way to develop their economic and social capacity.

IMMIGRATION TO NOVA SCOTIA

The province of Nova Scotia came on board late to participate in the national immigration program when it signed a provincial

nominee agreement with the federal government in 2002. Immigrant inflows began to increase around 2013, largely through the efforts of the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration to expand its provincial nominee program. In addition, the retention rates have increased to over 70 percent and have held steady for the past several years.

FIGURE 1: NOVA SCOTIA IMMIGRATION



Source: Nova Scotia Finance and Treasury Board, 2018

With a population of just over 400,000, Halifax is a small city on the national scale. Its status is enhanced by the fact that it is the provincial capital and the largest city in the Atlantic region. Census 2016 data show that about 9 percent of the city's population consists of people born outside Canada, which is less than half of the Canadian average. Immigrant settlement services began officially with the establishment in 1980 of MISA, the Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association, intended to support Vietnamese refugees. Government-funded training in English as an Additional Language was soon delivered by HILC, the Halifax Immigrant Learning Centre, and two other organizations affiliated with the Halifax School Board. The YMCA also began to serve immigrant youth through various programs, including school support workers. MISA grew steadily and took on other areas of immigrant settlement services.

BIG ENOUGH AND SMALL ENOUGH

In 2009, MISA merged with HILC to form ISANS. Today, ISANS has over 270 employees and delivers a wide range of services. It ranks nationally as one of the largest multi-service settlement agencies. Being a large immigrant settlement organization in a small city has given ISANS some unique advantages.

Over the years, as ISANS has grown and expanded services, it has also needed to expand its networks and connections with the community – with employers, professional associations, business associations, health care providers, other service groups, landlords and more. Being in a small city that is the provincial capital has meant that it is not difficult to reach people in key positions in these organizations. Decision makers are involved in work with ISANS and many have become not only partners, but also champions. Being in a small city has also meant having to deal with strong local connections that sometimes are less inclusive of newcomers. Local connections are key to finding jobs, so mentorship programs, professional practice programs and the Halifax Partnership Connector Program all work to create these informal networks, connections and personal champions for newcomers.

ISANS is now big enough to be known, respected, included and consulted by the community. It is also big enough that it has been able to develop some specialized services and expertise in various areas of immigrant settlement. This has been especially important in the work on recognition of international qualifications of professional immigrants, which is

a complex and multi-layered issue. Being large and having many projects means that ISANS has the resources to create distinct roles such as communications, which many smaller agencies cannot afford to do.

While big enough to provide a breadth and depth of services, ISANS is also small enough to work as one organization, with an integrated and holistic approach to client support. Staff in various teams often work closely together to provide wrap-around services, where clients are accessing language training, pre-employment support and family services. Many new initiatives have emerged as staff from different teams identify needs together and come up with innovative ways to meet those needs. This also ensures that there is no duplication of services. In the past few years, employment and language teams have developed new and effective Bridge to Work projects for clients with beginner level English skills. Staff have become adept at collaboration and have sparked synergy that creates new opportunities and approaches on a regular basis. ISANS, as a multi-service centre with program expertise, can also support settlement workers, employers and clients in even smaller centres and rural areas of our province.

The advantages extend to clients, as individuals and families receive support for many aspects of their new lives in one place. This reduces confusion and anxiety in the early days of settlement. In addition, the clients are in a multi-ethnic setting, where they learn to relate to other newcomers and begin to understand what it means to live in a multi-cultural society. The diverse staff model represents the Canadian mosaic and social networks soon extend beyond one ethnic community. Ethnic communities are smaller, which means that newcomers often make connections in the broader community more quickly, out of necessity.

BIG ENOUGH/SMALL ENOUGH IN OTHER CENTRES?

What does this example of being big enough and small enough mean for other small centres and settlement agencies? Is there something that they can benefit from in this story? Certainly, it is clear that small centres can be innovative and can make the most of their unique circumstances. The leadership of ISANS, while working towards continual improvement of service to immigrants, could not have anticipated in detail the trajectory of the organization. They deserve credit for being open to opportunities, willing to take risks and always committed to working in partnership.

While many immigrants continue to flock to the largest cities in Canada, especially to reunite with friends and family, there needs to be more awareness and promotion of the benefits of settling in smaller centres.

At this time, immigration to Nova Scotia is on the rise and will likely continue to rise. As Nova Scotia and Halifax grow, will they remain small enough? It is likely that for some time to come the benefits of being big enough and small enough will remain and be enjoyed by immigrants and those who work with them. We need to remember those benefits, be aware of them and continue to be open to opportunities, willing to risk and committed to partnership.

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