THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE EVOLUTION OF (RE)SETTLEMENT IN CANADA

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CONTEXT

Canada has one of the most studied models of refugee resettlement and newcomer settlement in the world. It is often held up as an example of the *art of the possible* – when the integration of newcomers is considered a societal endeavour and significant support is dedicated to this complex and evolving process.

This system is in continual flux as adjustments are made in deciding who is coming to Canada, what assets they bring with them, what (re)settlement challenges they may face, where they settle, and how receptive communities are to the contributions those newcomers can make to their communities and to Canada.

Interestingly, just as the impact of COVID-19 was being felt across Canada and staggered lockdowns were implemented, there were a number of major changes underway to the eco-system that underpins these two programs.

The most urgent was the active negotiations for contribution agreements for all resettlement and settlement agencies for the next five-year funding cycle that needed to be completed before March 31, 2020. The absence of valid agreements for these services would have posed an existential threat for the majority of the funded organizations across the country. IRCC quickly realized that negotiations were far enough advanced that concluding negotiations for new agreements would be significantly faster and provide greater stability for service providers than seeking a one year extension to existing agreements. The service providers, the IRCC regional teams, and the system enablers in IRCC headquarters put their shoulders to the wheel and got all agreements for ongoing services in place before the March 31st deadline. This achievement cannot be discounted as it offered service provider organizations fiscal stability for the coming five years – a stability that has already been critical to being able to adjust programming to meet challenges posed by COVID-19.

Simultaneously, IRCC and its partners had been engaged for the last few years in a recalibration of processes to balance accountability requirements and administrative efficiency. This exercise – termed "Program Reset" – is the next step[1] in

1 The previous exercise was the "Modernized Approach to Immigrant Settlement" which resulted, amongst other things in the collapsing of multiple small programs into one generic settlement program, the replacement of annual, local calls for proposals in every community, with a tri-annual national call for proposals, and more active engagement with the settlement sector in system evolution discussions. Eric Neudorf (2016) "Key Informant Perspectives on the Government of Canada's Modernized Approach to Immigrant Settlement". *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 48(3):91-108.

the constant need to balance efficiency in delivering funds and services aimed at obtaining outcomes for newcomers, with the accountability required for nearly $1B in public funds. This work aligns well with sector calls for the flexibility that is required in our unprecedented times.

Moreover, the evolution of the governance guiding settlement across the country has been evolving. This has included extensive work on co-planning between IRCC and its federal, provincial and territorial counterparts, engagement with a wider range of federally-funded settlement partners, and the implementation of joint projects and collaborations where possible in this eco-system of players that is integral to the success of Canada's approach to settlement. Concretely, the membership of the National Settlement and Integration Council began to expand to include provincial and territorial governments, other federal departments and agencies, a wider range of organizations that included francophone organizations, Immigrant Employment Councils, Local Immigration Partnerships, and service providers that deliver pre-arrival services overseas. Each of these expansions has resulted in a wider range of perspectives brought to a table originally designed to create a dialogue space between Citizenship and Immigration Canada (now IRCC) and the not-for-profit organizations contracted to deliver settlement services. In addition, the geographic balance at this table has begun to adjust to reflect the current (re)settlement patterns of refugees and immigrants across the country – both the Atlantic and the Prairies saw exponential growth in arrivals in the early years of the 21st century and required more representation in this critical governance structure. These changes too are essential to the effective COVID-19 responses that have been developed and implemented across the country as described below.

RESPOND

One of the great strengths of the Canadian approach to (re)settlement is the flexibility that is possible with a vast eco-system of partners. Operation Syrian Refugee was the most recent large-scale manifestation of how this eco-system can respond quickly and efficiently to challenges.

OPEN MULTI-TIERED COMMUNICATIONS

A key component of how this capacity can be harnessed is shown by the open lines of communication at multiple levels. In addition, the recognition that there is no monopoly on good ideas and that best practices need to be identified quickly, shared widely, and adopted where appropriate without regard to origins, have been key to making these communications channels work effectively and inform the response to COVID-19. Helpfully, the level of competitiveness amongst organizations seeking additional resources was also at a low point, since nearly all available resources had just been negotiated into new five-year agreements beginning April 1, 2020.

Multiple levels of open communication served the country well during Operation Syrian Refugee and it has worked to great effect here too. The Minister held a series of calls with the leadership of the settlement sector umbrella organizations across the country, as well as with the sector co-Chair of the National Settlement and Integration Council. The National Settlement and Integration Council has met on a number of occasions to discuss how to respond to COVID-19 initially and how to adapt to *the new normal*. A national working group on the impact of COVID-19 on the resettlement assistance program was implemented with co-chairs from the department and the sector meeting from April to June. This group resulted in a request for personal protective equipment for resettlement assistance program providers who were serving Government Assisted Refugees during their stay in temporary accommodations. A partnership between IRCC and the Public Health Agency of Canada has resulted in a six month supply to support this work that, by its very nature, requires face-to-face contact for extended periods of time.

Each region has also developed a strategy tailored to their jurisdiction(s) in order to maintain alignment among partners, implement national approaches, highlight challenges and best practices, and to develop solutions. These, in turn, have informed the development of national level discussions. Each region has a different approach tailored to existing practices, but all included outreach from IRCC officers to individual agencies and larger group-based discussions. For example, in the Prairies and Northern Territories Region we sought monthly calls with all funded organizations and our provincial counterparts in all three provinces. In addition, we have held thematic calls with organizations across the region delivering similar services. These calls have included case management, crisis/short-term counselling, settlement workers in schools, services for francophone newcomers, employment-related services, resettlement assistance programs (RAP), volunteer programs, and summer youth programing. Owing to the sheer number of providers, we also held separate jurisdictional calls with all language providers. These calls provided opportunities for sharing tools and experiences, learning from one another, and identifying challenges as well as areas where flexibility in funding agreements would be beneficial. These have either been addressed regionally or have been raised to the national level for discussion. A key example of this is the desire to have briefings for settlement agency staff on how newcomers can access emergency benefits. The idea was first raised by the Manitoba Association of Newcomer-Serving Organizations, but was repeated elsewhere across the country. This led IRCC to partner with Service Canada, the Canadian Revenue Agency, and settlement umbrella organizations, to hold national webinars in both official languages for thousands of settlement counsellors,

thus facilitating newcomer access to these supports.

The regular and ongoing communication between IRCC settlement officers and providers has continued, and a national mailbox for COVID-19-related questions has been established to triage questions and provide timely answers to exceptional circumstances SPOs may face. To date that mailbox has received over 160 questions. Key information for service providers has also been posted on-line.[2]

While provincial and territorial government partners are invited to the regional and National Settlement and Integration Council calls, they have also engaged in weekly calls at the Assistant Deputy Minister level, and through regular calls of the FPT Settlement Working Group and the FPT language forum. These have been essential to maintaining the program alignment described above. In particular, language assessment is co-funded in many jurisdictions and before rolling out flexible arrangements to deliver assessments remotely, the department consulted with its provincial and territorial partners.

FLEXIBILITY

The settlement eco-system responded to the onset of lockdowns across the country with great flexibility. IRCC supported a move to remote delivery for all but critical services (RAP, crisis counselling, and case management) and a willingness to allow flexibility within the new agreements to address the new environment. The financial stability that the department provided so providers could maintain their cadres of experienced staff, as well as approval for wage top-ups for critical workers delivering face-to-face services[3] was welcomed by the sector and facilitated continuity in service delivery. In some instances staff were re-tasked within organizations away from programs that cannot operate in a remote environment, and towards pressures in other areas of client need.

With very few exceptions agencies were able to convert to remote delivery of many services in a matter of weeks and, in some cases, days. This necessitated great flexibility on behalf of the settlement workers, the clients, and the department to facilitate significant transformations. Wonderful examples of partnerships emerged like the lending of tablets by the Calgary Public Library System to settlement agencies to allow clients without access to electronic devices to access services. The United Way in Calgary also partnered with private sector company Ructify to source additional tablets and laptops to lend or rent for minimal cost to settlement agencies assisting clients to access the wide range of services (including school) now available only on-line.

Naturally some system changes were also required to add flexibility to the system. Most notably in the area of language assessment, the first step had been in-person assessment. A number of options were introduced to ensure that recently arrived newcomers could have quick assessment and access to language classes. Language providers have also adapted to address client needs – from literacy to advanced language levels – and have reported increased availability of learners during the lockdowns. They developed local solutions and often shared what worked and what didn't locally, as well as drawing on Ontario-based resources such as Tutela (an inventory of curriculum materials) and LearnIT2Teach (professional development that helps language instructors incorporate technology into their pedagogy).[4]

Other system innovations have also recently come on stream with the new contribution agreements. Across the country SPOs have conducted "welfare checks" on current clients, but expressed concern about many newcomers who are unaware of or do not know how to access settlement services. An example of an innovation to address this need is the online "Welcome to Alberta" app introduced by Immigrant Services Calgary[5] which hundreds of newcomers have used to access the settlement service system for the first time. It allows newcomers to have a high level needs assessment and refers them directly to agencies with both the required specialized services in proximity to where the newcomers live.

The department has also sought to lighten the administrative burden on providers (while balancing the need for accountability of public funds) by delaying the reporting deadline, which allows SPOs to focus on immediate needs and adaptation of service delivery.

FLARE UPS

Newcomers are overrepresented in many of the critical services that have been most evident during the lockdown. This includes those working in close proximity to hundreds of others in places like the two large meatpacking plants in

2 Key information is posted at www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/coronavirus-COVID19/settlement-resettlement-providers.html.

3 Providing this flexibility to settlement agencies delivering critical face-to-face services aligned with options for other critical workers in communities across the country who took on elevated personal risk to deliver in-person services.

4 https://tutela.ca/PublicHomePage and https://learnit2teach.ca/wpnew.

5 www.settlementcalgary.com

High River, and Brooks Alberta, and more recently on farms in Southwestern Ontario.

In these instances under the leadership of Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, which provides services across Southern Alberta, a partnership with multiple service providers was able to work with stakeholders in both communities – including the major employers, health systems, and three levels of government – to quickly reach out to thousands of newcomers in many languages to ensure that information on staying safe was understood, and assess needs and deliver services. IRCC and the provincial government worked together with the sector to ensure enough flexibility in existing agreements to address eligible services, and a coalition of local funders – including the United Way and Community Foundation – provided resourcing for ineligible costs, such as ensuring food security and providing separate accommodations to facilitate quarantining impacted newcomers.

The experiences, best practices, and lessons learned from these challenging circumstances have been widely shared with other providers and communities across the country that have or might face similar circumstances.

RECOVER

At the time of writing this article (June 2020) I am reminded of Winston Churchill's famous dictum: "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning." We all fervently hope that we are at the onset of the recovery, as lockdowns are lifted across the country.

IRCC provided a letter to all funded organizations indicating that service providers need to align their re-openings with local public health official advice, and that they are strongly encouraged to maintain remote delivery wherever practical, while emphasizing the opening of face-to-face services (with precautions to maintain health of staff and clients) for the most vulnerable who were least able to benefit from the remote delivery of services. For example, while language providers made herculean efforts to assist literacy clients, this was less successful in general than for clients with higher literacy.

Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) was another programming area that was very much in need by newcomers, all of whom suddenly had to navigate the many on-line and virtual delivery modes of school boards and divisions across the country. This was challenging enough as it is for all parents and students, but was even more daunting for new arrivals to Canada, who had less familiarity with the Canadian education system, variable access to technology, and, in many cases, limited proficiency in official languages. In some jurisdictions the K-12 system has reopened in full or in part and key lessons are being learned about how education and SWIS programming will need to adapt in the autumn when it is anticipated that most systems will return to some form of in-person schooling. We are very fortunate that an evaluation is now being done on this aspect of programming, and we are hoping that some of the lessons learned will be picked up in that work and inform discussions on the future evolution of this programming.

Employment is another key area. While millions have been laid off or furloughed across Canada, many employers delivering critical services have been hiring thousands of new employees. SPOs delivering employment-related services have been working with newcomers to prepare them to avail themselves of these opportunities in a safe manner. In addition, SPOs have been working on how to help newcomers hone new skills during this period and how to engage employers to ensure that newcomers are rehired as companies re-open. This latter point is particularly important given the unfortunate examples of racism and xenophobia that have occurred across Canada.

There are, of course, many more examples of how settlement service providers are planning for the resumption of services. In the interests of space I will not go into them here, but IRCC has received dozens of resumption plans from SPOs and are responding to requests for required flexibility to resume delivery of priority face-to-face services as quickly as possible while maintaining safety of staff and clients.

Resettlement service providers have also been engaged by the department in a weekly capacity survey to allow for planning for the resumption of arrivals of government-assisted refugees once international flights become more readily available and as communities have adequate capacity. Balancing arrivals with capacity vis-à-vis resettlement service providers who are tackling public health quarantine restrictions will require unprecedented system coherence and reliable capacity data before IRCC's international partners arrange travel for refugees.

THRIVE

Many innovations have been introduced during the initial response and many more are underway during the recovery. However, to really capitalize on these the (re)settlement ecosystem will need to be fully committed to an assessment of how these innovations were perceived by clients and impacted their outcomes. There is no doubt that the usual pace of change of the (re)settlement systems will only accelerate as a result of what has been learned from this public health crisis.

First and foremost, while xenophobia and racism exist in any

society, they are more likely to rear their heads at moments of crisis. This was the case with 9/11 and again during the SARS outbreak. Unfortunately, it has also been the case during COVID-19. Work had already begun by some organizations including the Immigration Partnership Winnipeg to inoculate communities against the pernicious influences of xenophobia and racism even prior to the death of George Floyd, which has focused new global attention on racism. These kinds of anti-racism campaigns are vital to Canada and Canadian communities thriving in the future.[6] (Re)settlement of newcomers to Canada only works when Canadians and Canadian communities are actively and productively engaged.

Engaging Canadians in (re)settlement has always been an integral part of the Canadian approach, from the privately sponsored refugee program[7], to the former HOST program[8], and the contemporary Canada Connects Program[9]. However, the pool of Canadians interested in assisting exceeds the capacity of the settlement agencies to manage effectively. This has only been magnified during COVID-19, when many of the volunteers who are older are less able to engage, for fear of negative health consequences. Nevertheless, some agencies have found innovative ways to use more volunteers for one-on-one language practice through various electronic platforms; to use multilingual volunteers to assist with interpretation; and in the case of the Regina Open Door Society, develop an on-line self-paced orientation and training package for potential volunteers.

It is most likely in the area of technology use where the major advances are likely to be found. Many providers have described the potential to achieve economies of scale for professional development or for delivering information. In addition, allowing clients to access services remotely has increased availability for service access, like attending language classes. While a mixture of in-person and remote services seems inevitable (particularly for multi-barriered clients who struggle to utilize technology), in the future agencies may wish to invest proportionately more in highly-skilled staff and proportionately less in renting space which is typically the second greatest expense for settlement providers. These efficiencies could open the doors to providing a greater array of services to even more newcomers.

Such a shift will be essential if the settlement system wishes to shift from mostly reactive services – where only 30-40% of newcomers avail themselves of eligible services[10] – to a system that makes a proactive offer of services to newcomers. A more proactive approach would ensure that settlement resources are tailored to the needs identified by the totality of potential clients and not just those that are fortunate enough to become aware of services during their first years in Canada.

Finally, the need to engage a host of broader societal systems cannot be stressed enough. Ensuring efficient linkages between the settlement system and other federal and provincial systems such as education, health, social services, and labour market services has never been more vital. To paraphrase another former leader during unprecedented times of crisis, a useful way to capture this change is, "settlement if necessary, but not necessarily settlement." We need to ensure that we target limited settlement resources to those aspects of settlement that cannot be effectively managed by broader societal systems designed to serve all residents of Canada. As the Canadian population continues to diversify, these systems must become increasingly capable of serving all of their clients, patients, customers, residents, or students regardless of where they were born. During COVID-19 we have seen some encouraging signs that this is increasingly the case, but changing society is, of necessity, always a work in progress. We will continue to thrive as a society if we continue to see (re)settlement as a societal endeavour rather than the purview of any specific sector, department or program.

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6 www.ipwinnipeg.org

7 www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/help-outside-canada/private-sponsorship-program/refugees-information.html

8 www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/evaluations/host-program.html

9 www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/campaigns/canada-connects.html

10 According to the most recent evaluation of the IRCC settlement program, just 39% of eligible adults accessed at least one settlement service. The complete evaluation can be found at www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/evaluations/settlement-program.html#1-2-2.