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The Role of NGOs, Non-Profits, and the Government in the Provision of Settlement Services for Canadian Newcomers: A Policy Crisis

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Abstract

The concept of collaboration and consensus building lends itself to the emerging theory of “New Public Governance,” where a shift to horizontal accountability and governance takes over from ideals of vertical power in policymaking. This NPG style of NGO-government relationship allows for increased collaboration and sharing of power, while recognizing the benefits of advocacy on behalf of NGOs. However, the political side of the government is often more important than the public service in regards to the policy process, and political factors outweigh all others, including social and economic ones. Most settlement service agencies are hampered by government ideals, and recently, funding of NGOs and NFP groups who provide services to newcomers comes mostly from the government. The issue here is that with an increasingly neo-liberal political agenda, there is a discouragement of traditional advocacy roles, and the groups seeking funding are often in competition with each other, creating instability for the newcomers who are looking for assistance. Sense of place is lost, and the integration process for immigrants and refugees is firmly in the hands of external parties.

Introduction

A key talking point for Justin Trudeau in his Prime Ministerial campaign was his welcoming and progressive stance on human rights, immigration, and the well-being of Canadians old and new. With the increasing violence seen around the world in countries like Syria and Somalia, or with economic issues in countries across Southeast Asia and Europe, there has been an influx of migrants into Canada. Whether the migrants are forced to leave due to these external forces, or have voluntarily moved to Canada, it poses major challenges in sustaining balance across a larger population and making the newcomers feel welcome. However, Canada is a country born through immigration, and policies have always been in place to aid the increasing numbers of newcomers each year. In 2015 alone, over 320,000 new Canadians

were welcomed, with approximately 30,000 of those being government sponsored Syrian refugees brought in through Trudeau's watershed immigration pledge (CBC, 2016). This is a significant change from the Harper regime, where in 2008 Canadian immigration policy admitted only 22,000 newcomers each year (Berman et al., 2009). We can expect this number to persist, as the Global Refugee Crisis has displaced over 65 million persons worldwide, with many choosing Canada as their next destination (Kupfer, 2016; GC, 2016). Canada has the highest proportion of foreign born population amongst G8 nations (Evans and Shields, 2014), and our perception as a friendly, welcoming nation has been lauded around the globe by many organizations, including the UN.

However, there is a pervasive issue within immigration policy in Canada that must be reconfigured if long-term success is to be seen. The issues lie in the settlement services for newcomers, which are severely lacking in accessibility, are underfunded, and are constantly ignored by the branches of government, who have their own agenda on how to implement immigration policies. Settlement services are those services that aid newcomers in societal integration, such as language training, accessibility to services, community workshops, and even the introduction of culturally sensitive housing projects. These are in place to assist immigrants and refugees in adapting and integrating into Canadian society. However, this paper will assess the shortcomings in the implementation of these services, and show how the branches of government own a monopoly in regards to settlement policy. There is a strong lack of sense of place among immigrants and refugees in Canada, and the poor implementation of settlement services due to the politicization of newcomer needs allows for new Canadians to feel a deepened disadvantage in regards to successfully living in Canada.

Literature Review

Literature concerning the access to settlement services by immigrants and refugees in Canada is relatively new, with most accounts being tabled in the last two decades. As mentioned above, settlement

services to newcomers is a critical issue that needs to be looked at more in depth, as there is an increasing number of immigrants and refugees arriving in Canada each year. One usually places newcomers into two groups—refugees and immigrants. In regards to refugees, scholars such as Murdie (2010) have looked at the differences between *sponsored refugees* and *refugee claimants*. Since the 1980s, the number of government sponsored refugees has decreased relative to the increasing number of claimants (Murdie, 2010). With the arrival of thousands of Syrian refugees, this opens the door for potential changes to the data. Murdie further discusses the housing situations for refugees, and concludes that affordability is the major barrier to securing sustained housing, while the search for permanent housing is a much more daunting task for refugee claimants than it is for sponsored refugees. This is due to social ties that are more likely to be in place for those sponsored (Murdie, 2010). However, affordability of housing cannot be looked at in isolation.

Compounded with Murdie's analysis is the discussion of services, discrimination, and policies that exacerbate the issue of affordability, and create a space wherein newcomers can struggle to gain a foothold in society. Newcomers have a vast range of shelter and support needs, spanning from language training to city familiarization. Hiebert (2000), Carter and Polevychok (2008, 2009), and Wayland (2010) all discuss the challenges felt by newcomers across various Canadian cities, citing issues with finding employment, the large portion of income spent on housing, and inherent discrimination as major barriers to feeling secure in their space. Carter and Polevychok (2009) go even further, and determine that newcomers in Winnipeg are accustomed to "housing exploitation," wherein visible minorities are heavily marginalized, and vulnerable to unfair treatment by landlords and service providers (Carter et al., 2009). Housing exploitation has remained a pervasive issue for newcomers, especially refugees. Their vulnerability is taken advantage of, and the settlement services in place are inadequate to create a positive sense of place for these people. Discussions based on where to relocate have been done by scholars such as Teixeira, where he determined that larger cities, rather than mid-sized or small cities, are the preferred destinations for refugees and immigrants to Canada (Teixeira, 2008, 2009, and 2014). The issues of

discrimination are seen throughout Canadian cities, but his study on Kelowna, British Columbia, showed an increase in unease and discomfort amongst newcomers in a predominantly “white” population, where services were lacking and spatial biases persisted.

The literature that was analyzed determined that these issues have continued over time, and that the prevailing problem was with settlement services. Bryan Evans and John Shields (2014) along with Shields and Ted Richmond (2005) form the basis of this assessments argument that a sense of place is lost due to the inefficiencies of settlement services. Their focus is particularly on the NGO-government relationship, which has a fascinating history of exploitation and disregard for the populations at need.

Non-profit engagement with the governmental policy officials present challenges for newcomers

Housing is an essential first step in the resettlement process, and without adequate housing there is increased possibilities of health issues, an impairment to social and family life, and an overall removal of sense of belonging in the community (Carter et al., 2009). These challenges inhibit social integration, and can cause prolonging feelings of housing distress among the newcomer populations. The ghettoization of some neighbourhoods in Canadian cities is created through the continued isolation of discriminated groups, and the governments are not doing enough to remedy the consequences. The search for housing is problematic on many fronts, but the most significant is language and lack of knowledge in the system (CMHC, 2004). In order to mitigate negative effects on the housing search for newcomers, settlement programs and services must be at the forefront of immigration and social policy. As Carter posits, housing is good social policy (Carter et al., 2004), and the government has direct responsibility in engaging with affected communities and newcomers in order to fully gauge their needs into the future. A resource commonly used by the government to engage with communities is NGOs and non-profit groups (NFPs) that generally have a responsive and integrated role in the communities wherein they are located.

Alongside obvious problems such as the lack of affordable and family-sized housing stock, whose policies are beyond the scope of this paper, newcomers into Canadian communities are the direct victims

of an ongoing dispute between the wants and needs of the public and private sectors. Due to the histories of the Canadian social housing market, where it went from being a federal responsibility to its devolution to the municipal and third-party sectors, the opinions and needs of those most vulnerable have been lost in the wind. As Evans (2014) suggests, the Canadian model of settlement services garners positive attention internationally, but with the advent of more neo-liberal practices in parliament, these services are aligning closer to government goals, rather than those NGOs who are closer to the communities that they serve. The changing political landscape has a direct impact on the social landscape, where newcomer groups are often marginalized and social housing services removed from policy plans.

The engagement between NGOs, NFPs, and the government has changed over time, with recent assessments suggesting that although emulated internationally, it is a failed system in “crisis” that needs immediate change (Richmond and Shields, 2004). The Government of Canada adopts policies towards newcomers that adhere to three core points: adjustment, adaptation, and integration. Through their policies, they hope to tackle challenges in language barriers, unemployment, inadequate housing, and lack of information (determined as the blueprint to societal success)—however, they have failed to fully commit a budget that will solve these issues. Traditionally, all three branches of government provide some form of funding for settlement services, with the majority being seen at the national level. Actual implementation occurs at sub-national levels (Vengroff, 2013), where research, policy development, and political advocacy create the framework for integrated responses. This sub-national level, where NGOs play a crucial role, is the key to long term success—as these groups are more integrated in communities, can lend a voice to the vulnerable populations, and can identify key issues that can be passed on to the government. As Wayland (2006) puts it, non-profit and NGO advocacy is about “relationships that involve engagement with the state resulting in collaboration and conflict,” where most success seen over time in immigration policies require heightened focus on consultation and consensus building amongst relative parties (Wayland, 2006; Jedwab, 2002).

The concept of collaboration and consensus building lends itself to the emerging theory of “New Public Governance,” where a shift to horizontal accountability and governance takes over from ideals of vertical power in policymaking (Osborne, 2010). This NPG style of NGO-government relationship allows for increased collaboration and sharing of power, while recognizing the benefits of advocacy on behalf of NGOs. However, Evans and Shields (2014) determine that the political side of the government is often more important than the public service in regards to the policy process, and that political factors outweigh all others, including social and economic ones (Evans and Shields, 2014). Most settlement service agencies are hampered by government ideals, and recently, funding of NGOs and NFP groups who provide services to newcomers comes mostly from the government. The issue here is that with an increasingly neo-liberal political agenda, there is a discouragement of traditional advocacy roles, and the groups seeking funding are often in competition with each other, creating instability for the newcomers who are looking for assistance. Services become fragmented, long term viability is undermined through underfunding, and “administrative red tape” restricts progress for community integration (Smith and Smyth, in Osborne, 2010). By abiding to contractual obligations in funding, settlement service providers must align their goals with those of the government, as not to risk the loss of more funding in the future. Most often, when NGOs are “told what to do” by the government, their agendas end up misguided, and communication with the newcomers is lost. A remedy to this would be an amplification of voice through the conjoining of settlement service agencies, creating an “umbrella sector” that may be more prone to positive governmental relationships. An example of this can be seen with NGOs collaborating with universities to enhance research capacities, lending themselves increased credibility and validity in the eyes of policymakers (Evans and Shields, 2014).

Moving forward in policymaking

There is growing social exclusion amongst Canadian newcomers in a sociopolitical landscape that is generally quite inclusive to political agendas. Certain areas of cities have been labelled as socially excluded, wherein the vast majority of inhabitants are low income, visible minorities that have arrived in

Canada within three years (Galabuzi, 2001). Governments fail to understand that settlement is a lifelong process that often lives itself out in three stages: the first stage is one's initial reception to Canada. Here, the CIC heeds responsibility in providing some sort of neighbourhood background, basic language assistance, and short-term shelters (Richmond and Shields, 2004). If NGOs were given increased roles in this initial stage, one could argue that more resources could be applied to assist with language issues by having more diverse staff on board, or with community groups that can hold functions at community centres to welcome newcomers. In the second stage, no defined organization is in charge of assisting newcomers with securing long-term access to services, which is clearly problematic as no true voice is a constant in the community. Lastly, newcomers experience some sort of attachment to the place without losing their ethnic ties, which is aided by a myriad of organizations such as school boards and community centres. This third stage is a critical point in the settlement process, as securing some sort of sense of place is crucial for any person to feel a metaphysical sense of belonging in a space. However, it is concerning to note that there is no true social inclusion due to the lack of responsibility in "stage two," and an astounding lack of coordination and integration of efforts between NGOs and governments.

With changes to contract funding, we see a loss of diversity in alternative services for newcomers, and advocacy for anti-racism and development policies are removed in favour of more "public opinion" surveys that the governments suggest are more inclusive for society. Although that may be true, the deliberate underfunding of settlement service providers creates an inefficient system wherein newcomers to the Canadian housing market are directly marginalized and are arguably more vulnerable to changes in policies than they were upon arrival to Canada. Social housing, child care, equity programs, anti-racism groups, and community development programs all lose funding in the long run, and directly impact the most vulnerable in our society.

Conclusion

If social housing is *good* social policy (Carter, 2004) then New Public Governance Theory is *great* settlement policy. The three pillars of settlement: adjustment, adaptation, and integration have allowed Canada to be a premier destination for immigrants and refugees over time. With booming multicultural cities like Toronto, Vancouver, and even Winnipeg being seen as ideal relocation places, there is more need than ever to create practices and policies that work in concert with governments to create a safe, secure space for newcomers in the country. However, over time there has been a shift in political agendas to a more neo-liberal stance, and an adoption of contract funding to settlement service providers that completely undermine the goals of NGOs and NFPs who want to ease the transition for newcomers in Canada. The recession of 2008 did not affect Canada as badly as other nations around the globe, but it severely affected newcomers in Canada as low paying jobs were lost, and social dislocation increased severely. These vulnerable enclaves needed more supports, and the NGOs were willing to provide them—but the federal government cut funding (Evans and Shields, 2014) and the inevitable restructuring of settlement services restricted capacities for NGOs to assist those in need.

There is a pervasive issue amongst immigration policy in Canada that must be reconfigured if long-term success is to be seen. The issues lie in the settlement services for newcomers, which are severely lacking in accessibility, are underfunded, and are constantly ignored by the branches of government, who have their own agenda on how to implement their goals. There is a strong lack of sense of place among the incoming population, and the poor implementation of settlement services allows for new Canadians to feel a deepened disadvantage amongst their societal peers. The idea of “advocacy chill” (Griffith, 2013) that has resulted from contract funding for settlement services has created a competitive space where leverage is lost, and goals misaligned. Coordinating policy responses with an articulation of common housing and settlement goals will pave way for success in the future. However, the deliberate underfunding by the branches of government towards settlement services undermines the ability for immigrants and refugees to integrate into society, and sense of place is completely misguided when

NGOs and NFPs are restricted in their civil duty to help those most vulnerable. Under Harper, this was a severe issue—time will tell if this problem persists under a new Liberal agenda, guided by the young and progressive Trudeau government.

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