



Policy Roundtable Mobilizing Professions and Trades

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Smart Settlement:

Current Dispersion Policies and a Community Engagement Model for Sustainable Immigrant Settlement in Ontario's Smaller Communities

Executive Summary

With a mandate to "improve the economic and social integration of immigrants to Canada who are professionals and tradespeople," PROMPT commissioned a study to examine current settlement strategies. Increasingly all levels of government have espoused the dispersal of new immigrants in order to redistribute skilled labour, correct population decline and stimulate regional development in smaller centres. *Smart Settlement* proposes a policy framework and model for sustainable, effective immigrant settlement. Based on research, review and consultation, the model calls for engaging immigrants with local communities, while rejecting ineffective top-down measures.

Dispersion strategies, which offer new immigrants incentives to settle in smaller centres, have received wide attention from the federal, as well as provincial and municipal governments. These strategies have failed to produce long-term sustainable regional development because most immigrants move from the original place of settlement as soon as they have served their stipulated term. These approaches look at immigrants primarily as a source of labour. Having not been beneficiaries of a stake in the community beyond their value as a commodity, immigrants leave when better economic opportunities arise, leaving no lasting benefit to the host community either.

An alternative perspective is one in which immigrants are viewed as partners in community building and in their own integration. The alternative is based on three key building blocks for communities to promote sustainable immigrant settlement: leadership, social and human capital.

Local leadership is essential to affirming and steering the meaningful inclusion of immigrants in community building. A key part of leadership is gathering a critical mass of institutions that work as multi-stakeholder networks to plan and implement initiatives that produce synergy and a 'big bang' effect in community development. It is the cumulative effect of numerous progressive initiatives, policies and regulations at the local level that create the community conditions conducive to long-term immigrant engagement and participation. In addition to leadership and systemic inclusion, actively enabling social connections of immigrants to community networks enhances the social capital of both immigrants and the host community, and produces an environment of mutual exchange and participatory community building.

Furthermore, in order to reduce the likelihood of immigrants feeling isolated, especially in smaller cities, it is important for host communities to foster an effective link to networks and institutions that provide opportunities for further learning and advancement. These opportunities should be provided either locally or through accessible links to regional networks and institutions of learning.

Immigrants – like other people – have both short-term settlement and long-term settlement/community interests. Those who are engaged in community building are much more likely to develop a stake and a sense of belonging – community equity. Sustainable immigrant settlement in cities and regions can only be achieved through community-driven action.

Settlement service stakeholders, in order to be fully effective in enabling the meaningful participation of immigrants, will have to move further towards looking at immigrants as active contributors in this process. Sustainable and inclusive settlement outcomes require a move away from focusing exclusively on the initial settlement cycle stage of 'welcome' services, to the full spectrum of community connections and access to local social, political and economic institutions.

PROMPT's model for community engagement requires key elements to be realized:

- Pioneer an initiative with selected cities, which will require a champion or project leader to lead the building of contacts with local civic leaders and tapping into local business and social networks.
- Find a city partner with 1) a commitment to diversity and engaging new and meaningful community participation for immigrants; and that 2) has recognized – through key local leaders – the need to expand sustainable settlement.
- Share information with settlement stakeholders and gain their support for PROMPT's community engagement model.
- Secure funding investment for implementation of the model.
- Develop a flexible framework for measuring accountability for outcomes.

PROMPT recommends building equity and social stakes for immigrants in their host communities, while rejecting ineffective top-down approaches, whether dispersion strategies or an exclusive focus on settlement services or programs. Only a community engagement model can foster the sustainable settlement and regional development policy makers seek for smaller centres.