

The Pandemic, Nonprofits and Settlement: Resilience and the Challenges of Service Provision

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Newcomer Resilience and COVID-19: Settlement Policies and Programs

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Introduction

- Focus on nonprofit sector, and settlement service organizations in particular, and key role they have played in support during the pandemic (nonprofits are a key set of institutions linked to social resilience).
- This is drawn in large measure from: John Shields and Zainab Abu Alrob, *COVID-19, Migration and the Canadian Immigration System: Dimensions, Impact and Resilience* (2020) <https://bmrc-irmu.info.yorku.ca/files/2020/07/COVID-19-and-Migration-Paper-Final-Edit-JS-July-24-1.pdf?x15611>

Context Setting: Positioning the Nonprofit Sector

- Nonprofit sector has become the key service delivery vehicle for many gov't programs (New Public Management – Gov't steers, nonprofits row; a case of 'operational partnerships').
- The nonprofit sector also supplements social protection in Canada's lean welfare state model acting as social shock absorbers (filling gaps left by a shrinking state), especially during crises (case of foodbanks with food insecurity).

- Value of the nonprofit sector in terms of community focused delivery of services, multiple shapes/diversity & sizes to meet particular needs, and voice role of nonprofit organizations.
- Mission-based organizations with workers deeply committed to nonprofit goals (valuable asset).
- But nonprofit sector has been ‘used’ by the state as a ‘cheap service delivery agent’.
- Nonprofit service providers are featured by ‘lean operations’ and years of ‘doing more with less’ -
– permanent austerity (duality of resilience/innovation and precariousness – the limits of sector’s own resilience and as a force of social resilience).

“It’s a precarious sector and we’re really in danger in becoming ... cheap government services with all the accountability of government [and more] and none of its infrastructure and stability.” – senior nonprofit sector manager

- Underfunding of operational costs and infrastructure of nonprofits has been a persistent problem (example being the creation of a tech gap in the sector).



- Canadian Senate – “slowly intensifying crisis” of the nonprofit sector (much is expected but in the face of continuous significant under investment)

COVID-19 Pandemic and the Nonprofit Sector

- The 2008 Great Recession resulted in about a 5% culling of the nonprofit sector (especially smaller organizations) – a sector vulnerable to economic crisis.
- COVID-19 has been an even greater disrupter as well as a revealer of weaknesses in the structure of the nonprofit system.
- Pandemic heavily impacted the sector – Imagine Canada 1st wave survey revealed 63% of social service agencies reported a decrease in revenues, 37% laid off staff with the threat of widespread organizational closure (large loss of workers and particularly volunteers compromising capacity).
- Pandemic’s triple threat: “revenue loss, office closures and service cancellations and human resource challenges”.
- Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) nearly half of organizations did not have 3 months of financial buffer (thinly resourced, dependent on just in time capacities).



- For the nonprofit sector as a whole there was increased demand but diminished capacity from a precarious sector, plus significant pent-up demand for a post-pandemic period.
- The weakness of the nonprofit sector in filling gaps opened by the pandemic demonstrated the need for widespread substantive government intervention like the CERB – ‘Bringing the State Back In’ (counter to austerity and neoliberal narratives and policies). Opened a policy window to challenge neoliberalism and to ‘build back better’.

How Did the Nonprofit Settlement Sector Fair?

- Nonprofit settlement sector architecture composed of 3 core elements with varying pandemic impacts: 1) formal settlement organizations; 2) smaller more informal organizations (many ethno-specific); 3) more general community-based nonprofit supports that many immigrants rely upon like foodbanks.
- I will focus on the formal part of this architecture.
- The formal immigrant settlement sector organizations, while structurally facing many of the same challenges of the nonprofit sector as a whole, was better positioned due to cross-institutional support by government for their operations during the pandemic.



- IRCC and other government bodies provided critical funding stabilization (continued to fund at full level and with greatly relaxed expectations regarding meeting targets).
- IRCC supports settlement with over \$1.2 B in yearly funding. The commitment to settlement services is in fact a unacknowledged part of the broader Canadian welfare state. Long term commitment to state funding but community delivered settlement supports (the Canadian model).
- During pandemic IRCC was placed on an 'open for business' footing (shifted on-line with only 2% of staff in office but with pace of work intensified - \$4 B in 5 year settlement agreements signed).
- IRCC also engaged with increased and regular communication with sector agencies which was important for building needed trust and cooperation with funders (helping to moderate the impacts of a highly competitive funding structure).
- IRCC additionally provided additional funding to aid in such things as technical/digital up grades for agencies and immigrant clients.



- Overall levels of partnering and cooperation in the settlement sector was encouraged by funders and others and has increased (strong evidence of the building of relationships with for example the health sector but perhaps somewhat more limited relationship enhancement between settlement agencies due to the lingering effects of competitive funding models).
- Evidence for various surveys of the settlement sector, including OCASI, of the ability of the sector to successfully adjust operations and shapeshift to on-line service delivery with some front-facing delivery for the most vulnerable refugee immigrants.
- The shift to online services has generally gone smoothly for those with digital skills, good access to technology and strong English and French language skills. It has in some cases increased accessibility to some.
- However, some newcomers have fallen through the settlement service pandemic cracks.

- But it has remained a Sector under stress with many challenges for settlement workers including working from home, burnout, health & safety, as well as mental health issues.
- A saying in the settlement sector during the pandemic is that “it is not business as usual it is more business than usual”.
- Overall, what has been key is the essential role of government funding support for the formal settlement sector during COVID-19 – it has allowed these organizations to adapt and build ‘social resilience’.
- Immigrants have also been resilient but the pandemic revealed that for many their ‘lived experience’ is of extreme vulnerability – and settlement agencies have been of assistance in boosting their resilient capacities.



Future of the Settlement Sector

- Future of sector is one where its digital face will expand but as community organizations the public-facing side of sector remains essential.
- There is concern that government funders will revert back to past competitive and more rigid funding practices and that a period of funding restraint will be imposed to deal with deficits. Will government funders learn from the pandemic experience or return to 'normal practice'?
- Will the new digital capacities of settlement agencies that allow for service reach beyond traditional service boundaries could become a source of increased agency competition in the future.
- Lessons and best practices from COVID-19 experience need to be documented and acted upon – need for sharing with out fear or threat of excessive competition (promote the cooperation agenda).

- Importance of advocacy in post-COVID-19 period to address revealed inequities (agencies as voice organizations).
- It is also important to remember that “advocacy is good service because it helps to align community needs to public policy and programing” (Shields et a. 2017).
- Immigration is a central component of the post-pandemic recovery!
- Continued importance of immigration levels (funding base ultimately determined by this) – the need to broaden migrant access to services



Some Takeaways

- 1) Innovation and resilience of the settlement sector has been demonstrated and the importance of the sector for the social resilience settlement and integration.
- 2) Growing importance of technology (the digital turn) as sector shapeshifts into the future – need for technology investments and supports.
- 3) Need for investment to strengthen the overall capacity of settlement organizations (address the overhead short fall).
- 4) Stable government funding of the sector (and funding reform) is central to the viability of sector.
- 5) Need to learn and act on the lessons from the pandemic.
- 6) Reject a return to austerity and adopt a progressive build back better agenda.

