



# Nonprofit engagement with provincial policy officials: The case of NGO policy voice in Canadian immigrant settlement services

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## Abstract

This paper explores the role of nonprofit organizations in the immigrant settlement and integration sector in the public policy process in three Canadian provinces. Drawing on thirty one (31) semi-structured interviews with nonprofit and mid-level policy officials (working for a provincial government) in three provinces (Ontario, British Columbia and Saskatchewan), the place of nonprofit agencies in providing input and voice to policy issues in the area of settlement and integration services is presented. Issues regarding the willingness to use advocacy/voice with government funders, the usefulness of government consultations, strategies used in approaching government, the role of research in making evidence-based cases regarding policy and program change, among other considerations are examined. The assessments provided by key nonprofit actors and government policy officials are used to bring better understanding of the perceived roles of nonprofit organizations in the daily work of policy.

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## 1. Introduction: research context

This article explores the role of nonprofit organizations in the immigrant settlement and integration sector in the public policy process in three of Canada's provinces.

Using semi-structured interviews with non-government and mid-level provincial government policy workers in three provinces (Ontario, British Columbia and Saskatchewan) the real influence of non-governmental agencies in providing input and voice to policy issues in this policy field at the sub-national level is presented. This study seeks to critically examine the assumption of New Public Governance (NPG) theory that frames policy work as a multi-actor exercise through an exploration of advocacy/voice by nonprofit agencies, the effectiveness of government policy consultations, strategies used by nonprofit agencies in opening policy dialogue with government, and the role of evidence-based research in policy and program change. The assessments of key non-governmental actors and government policy officials of these policy advocacy activities are used to bring better understanding of the role of NGOs in the daily work of policy engagement with provincial governments.

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## 2. Immigrant settlement and integration services

The focus of this case study is immigrant settlement and integration services provided by the province but delivered by nonprofit service providers. This makes a particularly compelling case study because there has been a long relationship between government in Canada and nonprofit organizations in the provision of supports for newcomers to this country. This Canadian model of settlement services has generated considerable interest internationally, and has often been seen as a case of best practice. The reshaping of this NGO-government relationship, within the context of New Public Management (NPM) reforms, has in more recent years placed more strain on this form of NGO-government ‘partnership’ (Halligan, 2011; Richmond & Shields, 2005). Historically this policy area (settlement services) has been the primary domain of the Federal Government. Even though immigration is one of those constitutionally shared areas of jurisdiction the federal government has led the development of settlement services. A more substantive provincial role, beyond the special role the Province of Quebec has assumed beginning in the late 1960s, in direct support for immigrant settlement within their territory is of more recent origin (Atkinson et al., 2013, 14–15). The greater provincial presence in this policy area has emerged for a variety of reasons. Primary among these have been the impact of neoliberal governance models which have centered on devolving responsibilities. The provincial involvement in these services has however developed unevenly and the place and impact of immigration varies considerably across provinces. Both Ontario and British Columbia have been long standing traditional locations of newcomer settlement, particularly the metropolitan areas of Toronto and Vancouver which continue to receive the largest share of incoming immigrants. In fact, more than 70% of the foreign born population in Canada is found in these two provinces (Statistics Canada, 2013, 9). By contrast, Saskatchewan, until recently, struggled to maintain even its domestically born population base, has begun to attract a newcomer population and has undertaken more aggressive recruiting to feed the province’s rapidly expanding labor market. Its share of the annual landings of newcomers, while still very modest, increased from 1.5% (4835) to 2.7% (6890) of Canada’s total between 2007 and 2009 (Saskatchewan Ministry of Advanced Education, Employment and Immigration, 2009, 4). Overall, Canada according to our latest 2011 Census enjoys the highest proportion of foreign born population among the G8 rich nations at 20.8% (CBC, 2013).

While historically immigration and settlement policy in Canada has been largely set nationally, settlement and integration remains inherently a process that takes place at the sub-national level (Vengroff, 2013) this helps to explain why locally-based NGOs have taken the lead in settlement provision. The density and range of NGO settlement service providers in BC and Ontario, particularly in the larger urban areas, have been considerable and the development of settlement infrastructure took strong roots in these provinces by the 1970s (Biles, Tolley, Andrew, Esses, & Burstein, 2011; Hiebert & Sherrell, 2011). Saskatchewan developed much later in this regard and are only now building capacity (Garcea, 2011). Sector wide umbrella organizations in settlement formed at the provincial level in BC (Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC (AMSSA)) and Ontario (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI)) in the late 1970s and took a decade longer to emerge in Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant and Settlement Integration Agencies (SAISIA)). Their role in research, policy development and direct mandates for political advocacy varies as well. OCASI embraces all three roles, AMSAA does not do political advocacy, and SAISIA does not have a mandate for either research or political advocacy, although they all do engage in other collective voice and government engagement functions (OCASI & CISSA, 2014: 32, 2–6).

The Province of BC was one of the earlier sub-national governments to take on a greater role in settlement and immigration. This was greatly facilitated by an agreement between BC and the Federal Government which started in 1998 to devolve with funding settlement services to the province (Hiebert & Sherrell, 2011, 82–83). Currently however, as part of wide ranging set of Federal reforms to immigration policy this agreement has been canceled and settlement is being ‘repatriated’ back to the national government. This has caused considerable anxiety and confusion among settlement organizations in the province. The Province of Ontario also got a settlement devolution agreement with the Federal Government but the national government has refused to renew this 5 year arrangement. Ontario has had for a considerable period of time a separate department, Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration (MCI), which handles immigration issues (Biles et al., 2011). Saskatchewan by contrast has never had a settlement agreement with the Federal Government and the immigration portfolio has regularly shifted between different ministries (Garcea, 2011).

Settlement services are about providing various forms of support and assistance to immigrant populations which help newcomers get established in, and meet their core needs/requirements, for their integration into their new

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