Rural Immigration Scenario Planning Workshop

Report on Workshop in Antigonish, Nova Scotia

October 18, 2023

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Executive Summary

Historically defined by movement, rural Canada is diverse and movements to and from rural regions, towns, villages, and small cities are often defined by the distinct geographical, economic, and demographic factors of each place. Additionally, international immigration policies have significantly impacted population movements to and from rural and smaller communities both historically and today. More recently, national and provincial immigration and refugee resettlement policies and programs have resulted in an increasing number of newcomers arriving in rural places. Yet, attention to these movements, particularly the movement of migrants and refugees to rural areas, remains largely understudied and the impacts of such movements are not well understood.

Funded in part by a Connection Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), this project brings people together through a set of interactive workshops across Canada to discuss questions of rural-urban mobility, migration and resettlement, and the realities of life in rural and smaller communities. The **objective of this project** is to build collaborative conversations between diverse groups of people. This report documents the workshop held in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, which brought together a small group of 9 scholars, resettlement and immigration workers, relevant practitioners, and others working on topics of rural migration in Antigonish and the surrounding region. Together, participants were guided through a scenario planning exercise which was focused on exploring the current realities and future possibilities of rural migration. Facilitators took participants through four sessions centred around the four key questions that structure this report, followed by a closing plenary: Where do we want to go? How do we get there? What are we missing? What are the trends and patterns that shape rural immigration? Participant responses and discussions to each question are documented in the report below.

Overall, participants emphasized that immigration can meaningfully benefit both immigrants and rural communities. However, current gaps in resource and service availability (ranging from affordable housing to childcare, language classes to financial services) pose additional challenges for rural communities. To ensure that communities can adequately support immigrant populations, the participants made a wide range of observations and recommendations that we will explore further.

Project Introduction

Living rurally in Canada has historically been defined by movement. Young people often leave home to access education and employment opportunities in larger centres, immigrants arrive from other parts of the world, seniors often seek to remain, and young families come and go (Moazzami 2015). The decline of rural Canada has changed what it means to live well in rural places has shifted as the reality of living rurally has changed across economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Today, rural places are described as "failing" and are characterized by declining and aging populations, few services, and limited economic opportunities. Yet, despite the challenges, people, including immigrants and refugees, continue to choose to live, work, and play in rural places, while others will visit, and some will return (CRRF 2021; 2015). Newcomers in rural Canada face many of the same challenges as other rural residents, like limited access to broadband, few services, and a lack of public transportation. As a result, newcomers face the intersectional marginalization of rurality and, often, of other inequalities like racism. Many of the greatest challenges for newcomers in smaller communities – as well as potential solutions to these challenges – are systemic policy issues that extend far beyond immigration policy (Haugen, McNally and Hallstrom 2023). While refugees in particular may experience the implications of inadequate social policies exceptionally acutely, the obstacles they face are symptoms of a larger, more systemic problem. These barriers are the result of a broader policy design across immigration and rural development that hinges upon the principles of minimal disruption and status quo maintenance (Epp 2008; Brodie 1990), and a settlement model that is grounded in rural-urban differentiation.

In response to the challenges that rural populations, including newcomers, face in rural and smaller communities, this project engages with the larger policy, development, and economic forces at the centre of the "rural problematique" (Blake and Nurse 2003). The purpose of this project is to intervene in these systems through the development of a rural policy design for mobility, migration and resettlement that acts as a response to both urban-centrism and rural decline. This project specifically considers if increased and sustained immigration and refugee resettlement to rural areas could be one way to support rural revitalization and enhance the integration experiences of newcomers, amidst an ever-increasing refugee and climate crisis. The **overarching goal** of this project is to capture, understand, and facilitate conversations about population movements more generally, and both domestic and international dimensions of migration and resettlement, to and from rural and smaller places across Canada. More specifically, **the objective** of this project is to examine and understand how expanding immigration and refugee resettlement in rural places could act as a pathway to: (1) revitalize rural communities; (2) provide newcomers with more diverse options for settlement; and (3) grow Canada's immigration program (within a global context of rising human displacement rising). In order to further these goals and objectives, this project reinvests in the study of migration to and from rural Canada through a set of organized workshops and long-lasting outputs. Specifically, this project brings together researchers, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners across the country through a set of facilitated

workshops, to explore topics of population movement, mobility, and migration to and from rural places. Beyond fostering dialogue, networks, and knowledge exchange, the purpose of this project is to articulate a rural policy design for mobility, migration and resettlement. Policy design, as defined by Bobrow and Dryzek (1987) is "the design that sits above and before policy making and policy process. Consists of three components: context, values and audience." Considering rural policy design, therefore, means thinking about the context, the values and the audience that do, should, and could inform how we think about and make policy for immigration in Canada.

The workshop in Antigonish, Nova Scotia was held on October 18, 2023. It was the second of four workshops to be held across Canada, and it focused primarily on immigration in rural Nova Scotia and Cape Breton. The following report provides an overview of the discussions at this specific workshop.

The first workshop was hosted in June 2023 in Lethbridge, Alberta. Following Antigonish, a third workshop took place in fall 2023 in the city of Prince George, British Columbia, and another one is planned for spring 2024 in Ottawa, Ontario. The workshop in the National Capital Region will facilitate a conversation on federal policy and the role of the national and provincial governments in rural policy design. In total, the four workshops will draw together around 60 people, of varying backgrounds and rural experiences, from across the country. Each workshop will involve a different set of participants from the region where the workshop is hosted.

In each workshop, participants are guided through a scenario planning exercise to explore future possibilities and key drivers of change. Scenario planning enables participants to explore common experiences, consider future goals and pathways to achieve these goals, and identify leverage points. Scenario planning can be compared to planning a road trip, which involves identifying the destination, the means of transportation, and stops along the way, while anticipating factors like weather that might impact the trip. The workshops are structured into four sessions centred around the four key questions that structure this report, followed by a closing plenary: Where do we want to go? How do we get there? What are we missing? What are the trends and patterns that shape rural immigration?

Where do we want to go?

In the first session, participants considered three questions: What are the values that inform your ideal? What do you think immigration should **ideally** look like in your community and region, as well as rural and smaller communities in Canada more broadly? What does immigration currently look like in your community/context?

Diverse, healthy communities

First, participants identified the need for diverse, healthy communities as one of the key values that informed ideal immigration. Healthy communities—in this sense—were described as a holistic vision that extends beyond the physical health of those in the community. Rather, respecting all humans as equals, creating shared opportunities within the community to support well-being, promoting diversity, and fostering a sense of belonging among newcomers must be a focus. The participants remarked that if newcomers do not feel welcomed, they will likely leave to find a sense of community elsewhere. Overall, there was a general feeling that shared values—like sharing and inclusion—must undergird the context of immigration in all communities.

Building community

Participants also spoke about religious acceptance, and acceptance throughout the community more broadly. The participants discussed the concept of building community, equitable access to community resources, the need to foster social cohesion, and the importance of supporting individuals in having safe, dignified lives that include economic equity, housing, employment, transportation, and similar and/or equal access to social services throughout the community. This should be true for all immigrants, regardless of more 'hidden' or overlooked positions such as temporary foreign workers or international students.

The importance of representation in communities with changing demographics was also discussed. Participants asked, for example, "Is there any representation of immigrants or visible minorities on City Council(s)?" In an ideal situation, more representation would help support a more socially cohesive community.

Resource access and 'assets'

Another key topic was the need for equitable resource access. Participants spoke of the importance of sharing wealth in communities, and one individual remarked that we cannot welcome immigrants and then condemn them to poverty. As such, ideally, there is a centralized place where newcomers can access a wide variety of community resources and services, like financial assistance or healthcare information, to help them navigate the town or province.

Additionally, the participants identified more factors unique to rural areas, including challenges in retention. They discussed how, ideally, communities are viewed as places where newcomers want to stay and raise their families. In doing so, participants said that settled immigrants can be another support for newly arrived families. The current struggle faced by

many to emigrate from large, urban centers and adapt to smaller, rural communities was also discussed.

Overall, the participants identified the need to reduce the suffering of refugees and immigrants as they resettle, and to view newcomers as assets to the community (that are important to retain once they have settled). As an example, the participants pointed to Peace by Chocolate, a local, family-run chocolate shop in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. It is run by a family of Syrian refugees and has become a successful social enterprise. Overall, some participants commented on how important it is to assess the assets (not just the deficits) in both the hosting community and the newcomers, and to 'measure' this based on growth in human capital, natural capital, and social capital.

How do we get there?

In the second session, participants were asked to reflect on three questions related to how to achieve the ideals brainstormed in the first session: Who are the primary audiences? What are the common realities of the rural context? What barriers, challenges and roadblocks are preventing local communities from achieving their ideal vision for immigration? Participants were asked to distinguish between things that you and/or your local community have influence over and things that you do not, as well as to identify who has control over each issue.

All in all, the participants identified a wide range of barriers to service delivery at the workshop in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Despite the desire in Canada to encourage increased immigration, participants said that the pathways are convoluted and complex.

Community services

First, language classes and English literacy support were identified as central concerns. In some cases, new immigrants only have access to a volunteer conversation buddy to help them develop their understanding of English. However, for individuals who also care for young children, the ability to attend these sessions or more formalized classes may be limited. Limited childcare options were also identified as a barrier to attending job training. Participants remarked that the *affordability* of daycare and other types of childcare was also important.

Difficulties accessing spaces for newcomers to practice their faith was also identified as a barrier. Participants also shared that perceived differences or bigotry toward newcomers' faith or religious practices may cause community tension. Similarly, differences in views and religious practices may cause newcomers to be unwelcoming to other equity-deserving groups in Canada, like members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Cultural differences

This extended into a broader discussion on cultural differences. Participants remarked that Canadian culture is very individualistic and there are differences in the spaces for social

gathering and community (i.e., different perceptions of 'third spaces'). Another key cultural difference that the participants highlighted was the role of the cold climate in influencing social gatherings and individualism. It was remarked that—for many months of the year—the cold temperatures keep people inside and away from others. This is further exacerbated by rural working hours, where most community centres or public gathering spots close by at least 9 pm. Participants said that another key difference, broadly speaking, was that Canadians often have less free and unstructured time. Also, Canadian households often have two working parents, whereas this norm might differ for newcomers. In some cases, in Canada, people also have more than one job. Taken together, participants remarked that these factors related to culture and work may be quite different for newcomers.

Eligibility for programs and support
The limited support available to temporary foreign workers was also identified as a barrier, given that most temporary workers are not eligible for the same programs as other newcomers. Differences in eligibility, when combined with differences in jurisdiction for service providers, complicate the process. Participants said there is "conflict" between programs (in terms of who can offer which services and where), and that there is—overall—a lack of program availability in rural areas for newcomers. However, urban areas are also facing operational pressures (e.g., one participant said there was an eight-month waitlist for language classes in Halifax, NS).

Burnout among service providers
For volunteer groups who are offering support to immigrants and refugees, burnout among service providers was identified as a central barrier. Participants said that the expectations from funding departments are also very high and burdensome; for example, to be a Settlement Agreement Holder, the training was 8 weeks long for 3 hours per night. Volunteer groups may also not have access to anyone who can help them navigate the programs, like administrative support. At least one participant said they did not receive a response to their request for assistance from funders.

Affordable housing
Lastly, participants shared that housing was another significant barrier. For international students in particular, the expectation is that as recruitment increases, Universities will build more dorm rooms. However, it was observed that this is not necessarily the case, as academic institutions do not have the funding to provide additional housing. The participants also said that rhetoric of housing scarcity (i.e., sayings such as, "international students taking all the housing") has caused some groups in society to be at odds with each other.

What are we missing?

Changing communities
As we have already explored, the participants said that despite the desire in Canada to encourage immigration and grow the population, there are still many questions,

uncertainties, and gaps in the related infrastructure to support that growth. For example, what are the environmental impacts of the necessary infrastructure growth to support a growing population? Moreover, what are some of the additional resources required by a larger population? With the ongoing policy approach of growth through immigration, it was stated that racist attitudes may increase when people feel threatened by their (perhaps newly limited) access to resources. Participants also said that acknowledgement of discrimination can be difficult for service providers. The idea that not everyone in the community may be welcoming, warm, or caring towards newcomers is hard to talk about or admit. As such, the need for greater diversity and acceptance was discussed, as well as the need to reconcile political differences and/or other beliefs that may cause tension between newcomers and other residents.

Another observation specific to a rural context was the changing demographics of communities with increased immigration (e.g., one participant said that even if 10% of population growth is newcomers, that is a significant change in character for the area). By this measure, participants said that Antigonish is an immigration hub for the area. Further, participants said that policymakers usually assume that immigration is mostly for urban areas and do not necessarily consider rural areas as spaces where immigrants can (and may choose to) live.

The need for Canadian-based education was also identified as a key pattern. Specifically, to continue the ongoing work of reconciliation with Indigenous communities, participants said that newcomers should have access to education that reflects a more accurate story of colonialism and the history of Canada's Indigenous peoples.

Personal experiences
Other key gaps were identified on the personal and familial levels. First, cultural differences in Canadian social structures (like fewer multigenerational households or the residence of elders away from their immediate family) can be quite isolating for immigrants. This can also lead to family breakdown after resettling, which can be quite difficult to deal with in addition to the challenges of being in a new country and/or learning a new language.

Lastly, in trying to support newcomers with trauma or mental health issues, there are questions of service providers. Participants proposed a range of questions, such as: Do volunteers have the capacity, even if—as volunteers—they are professional health care providers; further, are they the correct health professionals? Even if there are services available, there are also questions of whether social stigma may prevent immigrants from accessing the services. Participants stated that unaddressed mental health issues may create social problems for the immigrant family and the community itself.

Trends and Patterns
Various trends and patterns were identified by the participants. At the macro level, participants said that an aging Canadian population creates a need to attract more young

people through immigration pathways. At the micro level, if a newcomer likes the area or community they have settled in, they will likely attract their networks to the same areas (i.e., from family reunification to extended family and friends).

<u>Government vs. community roles</u>

There were also questions raised about responsibility in supporting immigrant services. Some participants said that the government 'downloads' the responsibility to sub-national levels of government, who then offload the work to community organizations. The need for funding (and fundraising so volunteer groups can afford governmental audit processes, rather than distributing that funding to families in need) was also mentioned by participants.

One individual said that communities may take on additional responsibilities for retaining and supporting new immigration (and the broader community), and in doing so, there may be more hesitancy to later cede that responsibility to other levels of government, given that the community is so well-positioned to respond to local needs. However, they also said that communities will keep advocating for increased support from higher levels of government.

<u>The need for diverse representation</u>

As a general trend, one participant felt as though communities will likely see greater diversity on community boards, groups, and among volunteers to address these needs. However, there are also challenges surrounding different cultural norms for people serving on community boards/associations or within municipal government. As community service providers, the participants said that they would like to have immigrants on their organizational boards, but that it is often difficult to engage them in this way. Further, given that settlement services are the first point of contact for many immigrants, the municipalities collaborating with these services also need to be more inclusive.

<u>Underfunding of programs</u>

Another key trend is the continued underfunding of language training programs and services, in addition to ongoing challenges related to credential recognition (or re-certification) and employment. Overall, there was general agreement that a "neo-liberal shift" in immigration policies and practices has resulted in continued underfunding of programs, ongoing jurisdictional challenges and confusion, and continuous reductions in programmatic capacities (e.g., as is the case when immigrants must wait months to meet even a first point of contact, or when service providers are over-worked and burnt out).

Closing Plenary

To address some of the challenges identified throughout the workshop, the participants identified a variety of solutions and strategies. First, they expressed gratitude for being consulted. As local service providers, the participants offered greater insight into the unique needs and gaps present within the community. They also expressed a desire to share not just

the positive impacts of their services, but also the areas which need increased attention and support.

<u>Federal policy</u>
Participants revisited discussions surrounding government policies and their frustration with restrictive eligibility criteria(s) for services; the slow, incremental changes to the immigration system that are inconsistent with contemporary needs; and the need to support service access for all immigrants, regardless of whether they are 'permanent' residents (i.e., temporary foreign workers and international students).

When we consider all immigrants, newcomers, international students, and temporary foreign workers, there is quite a broad population base to support. There is also the political question; in some cases, participants remarked that there seems to be a political drive to garner the "immigrant vote" by promising items that may not become policy. Conversely, participants said that candidates may promise to limit immigration to gain a different "Canadian" vote.

<u>The role of storytelling</u>
Participants also said that it is important to tell the stories of immigrants and newcomers. On a daily basis, the participants said that they hear "horror stories" from people who need help in their communities. They felt that if a community could hear the stories of newcomers who are struggling to find support, the storytelling could help change the public perception of immigration.

<u>Community navigators</u>
It was also questioned whether funding may be available for volunteer organizations to hire someone as a 'community navigator.' Ideally, the participants said that this community-level funding would also be long-term to ensure some stability of the position. In addition, participants said it is important to provide resources to those who are already coordinating resources. It was suggested that federal and provincial-level representatives need to come together to address gaps through evidence-based programming.

<u>Affordable housing</u>
The need for affordable housing was again identified as a central issue in supporting newcomers. Participants also said that the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) makes it quite difficult to access the necessary funding for affordable housing.

Lastly, accessible public transportation was identified as another key, interconnected concern. Participants said that even if the housing is available, but it is not connected to transportation networks, individuals may not want to live there because it is more difficult to access larger city centres and services. Currently, many immigrants still need a car to travel between their housing, place of work, school, or services. This relates to the metro- and urban-centric nature of immigration policy discussed earlier.

<u>SAFE Rural Resettlement Model</u>

Lastly, one participant from the organization Syria Antigonish Families Embrace (SAFE) provided the SAFE Rural Resettlement Model from March 2022. It provided a helpful overview of the local challenges faced by immigrant families, a comprehensive list of education and employment needs, and a list of community resource partners. We thank the SAFE team for providing access to this document.

Ultimately, to achieve some of the visions offered throughout the workshop, participants said that persistence is key. However, given the multitude of cumbersome policies and processes (leading to burnout in many cases), greater support is also needed.

Next Steps

The workshop in Antigonish, Nova Scotia was the second of four workshops to be held across rural Canada as part of this project. For this research project, a third workshop was held in Prince George, British Columbia, and a fourth one will be held in Ottawa, Ontario. By bringing together researchers, scholars, policymakers, resettlement and immigration workers, relevant practitioners, and local decision-makers in these locations, the workshops have and will: (1) Build collaborative conversations around migration and mobility in rural areas; and (2) Explore how population movements, refugee resettlement, and immigration manifest in local realities. As mentioned, the event held in Ottawa will focus specifically on the policy audience. Policymakers and relevant academics will be invited to participate in a scenario-planning workshop to hear about the findings and feedback from the other events and consider the policy implications of the project overall. Individual reports will be generated from each workshop, and a final summary document will bring all the information and insights gained throughout the workshops together.

By bringing these groups together through knowledge-sharing and priority-setting workshops, this project facilitates a more nuanced understanding of rural-urban population movements in Canada within a broader context of rural decline and ever-growing human displacement globally. The current context of rising forced displacement means that these conversations are particularly timely and significant. As the international community grapples with rising refugee flows and increased population movements across the globe in response to conflicts and climate change, understanding rural-urban dynamics and experiences of such movements at the local level is important nationally, but also globally.

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