Rural Immigration Scenario Planning Workshop

Report on Workshop in Lethbridge, Alberta

June 23, 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 populations 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 workshop 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 inaugural workshop held in Lethbridge, Alberta on June 23, 2023 which brought together a small group of 21 scholars, resettlement and immigration workers, relevant practitioners, and others working on topics of rural migration in Lethbridge and the surrounding region. In small groups of 5-6, 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, participants stressed the need to shift Canada's approach to immigration from a transactional and siloed approach to a relational and holistic approach that considers the interconnections with community development. In conclusion, participants argued that a people-centred approach, that values migrants and their families for more than their economic contributions, should be central to immigration policy and process.

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 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 is 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, policy-makers, 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 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 audience that do, should, and could inform how we think about and make policy for immigration in Canada.

The first workshop was held in Lethbridge, Alberta on June 23, 2023 and focused primarily on immigration in Alberta outside of Calgary and Edmonton. The following report provides an overview of the discussions at this workshop. Additional workshops are planned for fall 2023 and winter 2024 in the small town of Antigonish, Nova Scotia and the small city of Prince George, British Columbia. The last workshop will be held in Ottawa as a way to 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 more than 60 people, of varying background 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? Participants suggested that immigrants often come to Canada to seek **safety** and a **better life**. Immigration can be a win-win scenario, benefitting both immigrants and rural communities. The ideals and values identified by participants are summarized below.

Proactive, thoughtful, and intentional approach
Participants identified the ideal approach to rural migration as one that is proactive, thoughtful, and intentional. A proactive approach would include putting in place a framework and policies before welcoming people, rather than playing catch up after people arrive. This

approach would involve collaboration from all levels of government in intentionally targeting newcomers and supporting them after arrival with adequate resources. It would also include preparing services and communities to receive newcomers, with proactive education on inclusivity and immigrant needs, such as interpretation services. Policies would also be holistic in considering the diverse needs of newcomers and the various aspects to make rural immigration successful, such as housing, employment, and social networks.

Collaboration between services, communities, and levels of government
Participants identified the ideal of effective communication, coordination, and collaboration between different services, agencies, communities, and levels of government. Federal and provincial governments would support communities with stable funding to support newcomers, funding that is not dependent on the current political situation. There would be effective communication and coordination with federal and provincial governments over time, despite changes in immigration ministers. Provincial immigration programs targeting rural municipalities – such as the Alberta Rural Renewal Stream – would benefit from additional resources to better support the communities implementing them and create a more bottom up approach. Federal immigration processes would be streamlined and faster, with less red tape and more communication on the status of immigration applications. Elected officials and administrators at municipalities would actively support immigration and build a welcoming environment for newcomers. Communities would be supported to create welcoming frameworks from the bottom up, with the time, resources, and people to create and implement these frameworks. Rural communities would work cooperate rather than compete for immigrants, distributing supports between municipalities and dispersing immigrants to communities to effectively meet community and newcomer needs. Service providers would be well educated on what newcomers need and prepared to support them. Private services, such as car insurance, would also become more accessible for newcomers.

Flexible and adaptive systems
Recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach is not effective, participants envisioned flexible and adaptive systems that could serve the needs of diverse newcomers and diverse communities. In many organizations, it would look like hiring employees who speak different languages. In the education system, this ideal would mean adaptations to more effectively support the educational journeys of different cultural communities, such as Mennonites and Hutterites who typically leave school at the 14 years old. For federal services like the Canadian Revenue Agency, this ideal would mean facilitating access through an openness to working with translators over the phone, rather than forcing newcomers and service providers to travel long distances to come in person. It would also mean simplifying information websites and application forms to make them easier for newcomers and service providers to understand. It would also look like broadening access to English language training so that temporary residents and recent Canadian citizens living in rural areas could access English training, which is essential for connecting well with the community. In the area of

employment, it would look like flexibility in the ways to communicate information to employees, allowing employers to communicate through visuals and other languages besides English, rather than penalizing employers who try to cater to the needs of their employees who are not fluent in English.

Equity between different newcomer groups
Participants also wanted to see equity between different newcomer groups, both different ethnocultural groups and different immigration streams. All immigrants, regardless of their race, ethnicity, national origin, or stream (economic, refugee, students, displaced Ukrainians, etc.) should receive rapid access to services and equitable treatment.

Valuing newcomers beyond economic contributions
Participants also emphasized the importance of valuing newcomers beyond economic contributions. Participants felt that the immigration system and employers were too narrowly focused on filling gaps in the labour force, rather than the broader benefits newcomers can bring. For example, one person arriving as a worker may come with a spouse and children who can also contribute to the community. Governments and municipalities would ideally understand the spin-off value of immigration and the return on investment of support programs.

Meaningful employment opportunities
Participants recognized the importance of opportunities for meaningful employment for all newcomers. Critically, this ideal means that governments and employers need to find ways to recognize the prior credentials of immigrants so that immigrants can work in their fields of training and experience, using their skills to contribute to communities. Although there are some limited programs for credential recognition, participants envision such programs expanding so they are widespread in all provinces and more inclusive of different careers. Offering meaningful employment opportunities may also include better matching systems that allow communities to invite immigrant families who can meet specific community needs and help rejuvenate struggling sectors. Participants also recommended various ways employers could support newcomer employees, such as offering mentorship programs and accepting employees even if they are working on learning English. Participants also envisioned improved access to transportation and networking opportunities to facilitate access to existing employment opportunities.

Transparency and expectations
Participants highlighted that rural immigration strategies should be transparent about rural realities and challenges to help newcomers know what to expect when they move to rural places. Potential immigrants can then consider their options and exercise informed consent when choosing a rural community.

Housing and Services

Participants also envisioned the ideal of widely available, safe, affordable, and suitable housing. Although transitional housing can play a role, participants emphasized the need for longer-term housing options. Participants also hoped for stronger services, including mental health supports, immigration-related resources, social services, transportation, and daycare, with services ideally integrated with each other and located in the same buildings.

Belonging

Participants hoped to foster a sense of belonging among newcomers. One participant defined belonging as being invited to contribute and reap benefits from a community, and integration as being celebrated for differences. Another participant said that welcoming is being invited to the party and belonging is being asked to dance. One participant highlighted that integration is a two-way street and the community also needs to change, such as by recognizing different holidays. Participants noted that good access to services will contribute to a sense of belonging, but social connections and mutual aid are also important. Participants hoped that newcomers would have more opportunities to interact and connect with long-term residents. Belonging is important not just for adults, but also for children in schools, who can make friends and help a family decide to stay in a community. Participants felt that starting with welcoming intentions was important, but it was also important for communities to look at our similarities rather than our differences, value diversity of thought and diversity of experiences, and facilitate intercultural conversations. While rural communities offer opportunities for social integration with strong community culture, this culture may also be difficult to break into for immigrants. Participants saw how gradually members in their communities were being exposed to more immigrants and becoming more open-minded. Finally, participants saw the importance of community leadership structures including newcomers.

Retention

The ideals discussed above, especially a sense of belonging, contribute to the ideal of retention. Participants hoped to see newcomers choose to stay long-term.

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 has influence over and things that you do not, as well as to identify who has control over each issue.

Primary audiences

Participants agreed that everyone should be at the table, including newcomers themselves, policy makers, mayors, municipal councils, municipal government employees, local Members

of Parliament, provincial Members of the Legislative Assemblies, provincial and federal governments, employers, business owners, the Chamber of Commerce, housing developers, schools, and Local Immigration Partnerships where these exist. Local Immigration Partnerships were recognized as a potentially valuable tool to bring people together, but also as organizations that are often underfunded and underutilized. While including a broad group of stakeholders is important, participants recognized that immigration is not always on the agenda of municipal governments and others who are interested in various issues. Although municipalities cannot directly create immigration policies, they have a role in various areas that are relevant to immigration, including quality of life in their communities, land use, arts and culture policies, recreation, and some social policies. Given the importance of housing to welcoming newcomers, going forward it will be important to housing actors in immigration conversations, such as housing developers or people drafting affordable housing policies.

Common realities

Participants remarked that rural is inherently small, meaning that there is a lack of scale for both funding and expertise. Participants also noted common issues across their different communities, including access to housing and to interpreters, particularly in health care settings. Participants acknowledged that racism and discrimination were present in their communities and that not everyone living in their communities were pro-immigration. In this context, there was less openness to visible minority newcomers and more community support for white newcomers such as Ukrainians. Participants noted that some community members have forgotten the immigration histories of their ancestors, so there is a need for community education about this immigrant and colonial past. While there were success stories of immigration boosting communities, participants felt that these stories were not always shared and there were few platforms to share them. Greater opportunities to share success stories would help in building awareness about the benefits of immigration.

Barriers

Missing data

Participants identified missing data as a barrier to understanding the realities of immigration and to addressing resistance to immigration. Participants felt that they did not fully understand why some people in rural communities support immigration, why some people in rural communities oppose immigration, and why immigrants stay in or leave rural communities. This lack of data can lead to unhelpful assumptions about resistance to immigration, such as assuming that prejudice and racism are the only factors contributing to hesitancy about immigration. More data would help proponents of immigration to meet people where they are, to understand their hesitancy towards immigration, and to educate people when there is a knowledge deficit. More data would also be helpful in informing policies. One participant highlighted the opportunity of a current initiative to revamp community profiles to make a business case for economic immigration and to educate people

in the community. Participants also felt that immigration success stories should be shared more widely.

Lack of knowledge and resistance to immigration among community members
Although there are some data deficits to fully understanding community resistance to immigration, it is clear that a lack of knowledge in the community and some resistance to immigration are significant barriers. This resistance includes long-held social and cultural beliefs, a "redneck" identity, bias, and a lack of awareness. Many people in small rural communities have not travelled far beyond their community and as a result have a limited global perspective. Participants gave some specific examples they have encountered of resistance in their communities. One participant noted that municipal policies and rhetoric saw immigration as a "transactional relationship" where immigrants were only workers, with a reluctance to involve immigrants in the broader community. However, since immigrants and long-term residents inevitably live close together in a rural community, over time the community was able to "warm up" to immigrant populations.

Participants highlighted the importance of education to build greater awareness about immigration, counter myths and misunderstandings, explain the multi-faceted benefits of immigration, and remind communities of their immigration histories. For example, some people believe that newcomers take away jobs, yet the reality is that newcomers are often working in low-wage jobs that are not as appealing to long-term residents. This education can involve more formal channels like the education system, but participants also spoke of their efforts to educate people within their immediate spheres of influence. Participants felt that long-term residents could more effectively call out unwelcoming behavior than newcomers.

Service gaps
Participants noted several significant service gaps, especially language training, health care, transportation, and housing.

Interpretation
Participants explained that a lack of language interpretation is a barrier for newcomers to access services in their communities. Many services like medical clinics and dentists in their communities do not provide interpreters. Participants gave examples when newcomers have been refused service for not having an interpreter or when settlement agencies have been forced to provide interpreters for external services. Participants felt that services and businesses should provide interpretation to make their services more inclusive and accessible. Participants also offered suggestions to incentivize accessibility, for example by having a welcoming designation for businesses who are accessible to all, including immigrants and people with limited mobility.

Jurisdictional challenges

Participants identified jurisdictional challenges as another barrier to achieving immigration ideals. In some cases, jurisdiction is unclear, while in other cases there is a "not my problem" attitude that prevails as governments avoid taking an active role. Funding is often lacking for municipal or more local efforts to support newcomers. One participant noted that the people deciding on provincial grant funding for rural communities in Alberta are based in Edmonton and may not understand rural communities. At times, provincial immigration programs are not well-integrated with local or national programs, or with programs in other provinces. There are also barriers to effective communication between different levels of government and in some cases between different municipal services in communities where municipal services are contracted to different organizations. While municipalities have some control over local services and recreational programming, they may not recognize their role in creating spaces and programming that fosters belonging. Some communities are also engaging with local Indigenous communities, but there is a need for further efforts to connect newcomers and Indigenous peoples.

Capacity challenges in a complex immigration system

Participants highlighted significant capacity challenges related to recruiting, welcoming, and supporting newcomers. For example, Alberta's Rural Renewal Stream requires municipalities to review immigration applications, which can mean one municipal staff member reviewing over 1,000 applications. Unfortunately, given this volume of applications, it is not possible for municipalities to coach applicants on how to put together a strong application. Despite governments saying that rural immigration is important, that rhetoric is not always matched with resources. This capacity challenge is compounded by the complexity of the immigration system, with many complex pathways that can be difficult to understand for schools and even for people working in the sector.

What are we missing?

In the third session, participants were invited to reflect on several questions: For each barrier, identify: what are the known unknowns? And the unknown unknowns? What are the things people **aren't** thinking of when talking about rural immigration? (What are the unspoken realities?). Participants identified several topics that they felt were not adequately discussed in conversations around rural immigration.

Long-term view of immigration and population growth

Participants felt that discussions around immigration would benefit from a longer-term vision of immigration and population growth. This vision could consider the long-term benefits of immigration across multiple generations, countering a deficit-based view of immigration. Participants also highlighted the importance of looking at success from a newcomer perspective, which can take a longer timeframe over more than one generation. For example, many newcomers define success as their children achieving the "Canadian dream."

Participants also pointed out some specific challenges that could be addressed in longer-term planning, such as the need for a pathway for Ukrainians to become permanent residents, or the longer-term implications of refugees needing to pay back travel loans that can be up to $10,000. One participant wondered whether the high interest in coming to Canada will be sustained in the long-term, or whether immigrants will look to other countries. Participants also suggested that policy changes could allow municipalities to take a greater role in immigration.

A longer-term vision should also plan for the implications of population growth. In particular, participants noted that the health care system and schools need more capacity to accommodate growing populations. Since immigrants typically have more children than Canadians, it will be important to plan for larger families, including adequate housing, schooling, childcare, and early childhood education. Participants also noted specific challenges in training the number of health care staff needed for current and future populations. Municipalities should consider population growth in their planning and consider the longer-term impact of urban planning decisions, like the impacts on newcomers who do not own a car when designing services around the assumption of car ownership.

Finally, a longer-term vision of newcomer journeys should acknowledge that newcomers may not be ready for services and workshops in the first year after arrival. In the first year, newcomers are often focused on meeting basic needs and may wish to access the various workshops, programs, and services offered. Later in their journeys, newcomers may be in a better position to access services. Services also need to consider the different needs of different age groups.

Transportation
Although transportation is a widely acknowledged issue in rural communities, participants agreed that there were some unknowns about the future of transportation. For example, there are outstanding questions about the role of electric vehicles in expanded transportation networks, the ability to quantify the community benefits of funding public transportation to create buy-in, the changing political will around public transportation, and the potential impacts on local businesses.

Political structures
Participants lamented the lack of representation of diverse community demographics within community leadership structures and limited political will to learn about and champion immigration. Participants also thought that it was important to acknowledge the informal groups in rural communities who are highly influential and may be resistant to change.

Cultural differences
Participants also believed that challenges related to cultural differences and culture shock are not adequately discussed, such as language barriers, different cultural perspectives on mental health, cultural and gender norms in the workplace, expectations around speaking English,

and eye contact norms. Participants also found that sometimes concepts get "lost in translation." Participants gave some specific examples of how policies may not be sensitive to cultural differences. For example, community outreach police are required to hold a gun on duty, but seeing a gun can create fear for newcomers who had bad experiences with police or security forces in their countries of origin. As another example, some immigrant groups prefer to live with multiple generations in one household, yet local housing does not often target larger families. One participant suggested that community members should make an effort to learn a few words in newcomer languages.

Geopolitics
Participants wondered about how geopolitics would continue to impact immigration trends. For example, participants observed differences in the amount of time it is taking to process applications from different countries based on security or geopolitical considerations related to specific countries. Participants also expressed concern about growing worldwide populist backlash against immigration.

Race, Ethnicity, and Religion
Finally, participants thought that race, ethnicity, and religion are not sufficiently discussed. For example, sometimes people sponsor refugees of the same faith, communities often have different openness to refugees of different races and religions, and religious groups operate their own internal welfare systems that benefit people of that religion but are not universally accessible.

Trends and Patterns
In the fourth session, participants were invited to reflect on three questions: What are the trends in rural immigration? Where do the barriers (identified previously) fit within these trends? Where do these trends take immigration?

Although participants identified a variety of trends, they explained that it can be difficult to identify trends since no single actor is responsible for collecting data on rural immigration and there is a lack of capacity to analyze immigration data. As mentioned previously, there is an overall data gap when it comes to rural immigration. Participants identified Local Immigration Partnerships, especially regional or zone LIPs, as tools to promote collaboration, collect data, and share information. Regardless of the data gap, participants suggested that it was not necessary to wait to have all the data before making decisions.

Global Trends
Participants recognized that **mobility** around the world is increasing, as more people travel and move to different places throughout their lives. In this context, **immigration will continue** to be a part of life. Globalization also means that people, especially children, have greater **exposure to different cultures**. However, participants expressed concern about the **politicization of immigration** and the weaponization of immigrants for political agendas.

Canadian Immigration Policy Trends

Participants recognized that immigration has been a **key component of Canada's history** and that an **increasing number of immigrants** come to Canada each year. Some of the immigrants will come through many new **pilot projects**, including some to recruit people in specific professions like the health care field. The increase in different streams also means increasing **complexity** in the immigration system, which means more complex application forms for applicants. Overall, Canada's immigration system remains **economically-driven**, which motivates an increasing number of economic immigrants and international students. Participants expressed concern that the near exclusive focus on economically-driven migration is **leaving out the human aspect** of migration and other forms of immigration like family reunification. Participants also noted the **focus on specific groups** who receive more political attention and support at different times, such as the current emphasis on Ukrainians. Overall, participants felt that the system is more responsive to some groups over others, based on factors like race, religion, and media attention.

Growing Interest in Rural Immigration

Another trend is a **greater political interest in rural immigration**, tied to a push to create viable rural communities amid population decline. Alongside this growing interest, new Local Immigration Partnerships have been established outside of major cities. However, despite the increased political interest, there are questions over whether immigrants want to go to rural communities, whether the infrastructure is adequate, whether rural communities see immigration as a solution for their problems, and whether these new policies understand rural contexts. Some policies bring immigrants to rural areas but fail to address why young people leave rural areas and do not return. At the same time, there is a growing emphasis on social resiliency, community, and mutual aid.

Housing Trends

Participants observed that employers are becoming involved in addressing housing shortages. In some communities, employers are building homes for their employees. While participants could see the potential benefits of this trend, they also expressed concern over the potential risks and conflicts of interest when employers are also landlords.

Immigrant Trends

Participants remarked that many immigrants are going back to school to upgrade credentials after arrival. They also emphasized the importance of cultural community to make rural communities better for immigrants and to counter social isolation.

Closing Plenary

In the final session, participants discussed as a whole group the best ways to achieve the ideals identified in the morning session, keeping in mind the context, audience, and values.

Shifting from a transactional and siloed to a relational and holistic approach

Participants highlighted the need to shift our approach to immigration from a transactional and siloed approach to a relational and holistic approach that considers the interconnections with community development. Participants identified disconnects between federal and provincial policy, including a wide variety of immigration programs and pilots that are not well integrated together. For example, the 'temporary' label of various programs sends a message that people are less valued, even if they hope to use their temporary work or student visas as a starting point for permanent settlement. Participants also hoped that the federal government would take feedback from Local Immigration Partnerships and other local partners more seriously.

Reconsidering the meaning of success

Participants discussed how the quantitative outcomes for success identified by the federal government – in particular a model based on results per dollar – disadvantages rural communities and neglects more qualitative measures of success that may be more relevant in rural communities.

Engaging the post-secondary sector

Participants thought that the post-secondary sector should be more engaged in future discussions of rural immigration. Although post-secondary institutions are important immigration pathways for international students, this pathway is not adequately recognized in policies. For example, these students are not eligible clients for settlement services and rural communities are not well-equipped to support students who want to stay in their communities or who want to take advantage of specific immigration streams like the Rural Renewal Stream. Post-secondary institutions may also play a role in addressing gaps in recognizing credentials and experience for immigrants.

Promoting community buy-in

Participants discussed the importance of framing immigration to highlight the benefits to the community, explaining the practical consequences of shrinking populations, engaging municipalities, and taking advantage of community networks to promote buy-in. Shifting culture and building the infrastructure to support immigration takes time. While there are many likeminded people at the workshop and at similar discussions, there is a challenge in reaching others beyond immigration circles. There are also opportunities to think in new and creative ways about using community assets, like transforming unused community buildings.

Next Steps

The workshop in Lethbridge, Alberta was the first of four workshops to be held across rural Canada as part of this project. Workshops will also be held in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Prince George, British Columbia, and Ottawa, Ontario. Bringing together researchers, scholars, policy-makers, resettlement and immigration workers, relevant practitioners, and local decision-makers in these locations will: (1) Build collaborative conversations around migration and mobility in rural areas; and (2) Explore how populations movements, refugee resettlement, and immigration manifest in local realities. The event held in Ottawa, Ontario will focus specifically on the policy audience. Policy makers and relevant academics will be invited to participate in a scenario-planning workshop, and 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 of 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 populations 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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