

Rural Immigration Scenario Planning Workshop

Report on Workshop in Ottawa, Ontario

February 20, 2024



Prepared By:

Sydney Whiting

Stacey Haugen, MA

Rachel McNally, MA

Lars K. Hallstrom, PhD



the Prentice Institute
for Global Population and Economy



**University of
Lethbridge**

Rural Immigration Scenario Planning Workshop

Report on Workshop in Ottawa, Ontario

February 20, 2024

Disclaimer:

No particular observation or comment should be attributed to any specific individual, unless otherwise specified. Any errors in description or interpretation are those of the authors.

Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy
University of Lethbridge
Lethbridge, Alberta
<https://www.ulethbridge.ca/prentice-institute>

© Copyright 2024 Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy

Prepared By:

Sydney Whiting
Stacey Haugen, MA
Rachel McNally, MA
Lars K. Hallstrom, PhD



the Prentice Institute
for Global Population and Economy



**University of
Lethbridge**

This project is supported in part by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Project Introduction.....	3
Where do we want to go?.....	5
Outlining some ideals.....	5
Rurality and employment.....	6
Respect and belonging.....	6
Services and community preparedness	7
How do we get there?	8
Primary audiences	8
Barriers	9
Key assumptions	10
Policy perspectives	11
What are we missing?	12
Attitudes	12
Employment and integration.....	13
Knowledge-sharing and misinformation	13
Funding and systematic challenges	14
Unspoken realities	14
Representation of the issues	15
Indigenous engagement	15
Overview of Rural Findings.....	16
Presentation	16
Plenary Discussion	17
Community development.....	17
Employment and economy.....	18
Local and regional challenges.....	18
Final reflections	18
Conclusion	19
References.....	20

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 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 Ottawa, Ontario, which brought together a small group of 22 scholars, policymakers and relevant practitioners. 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. To achieve an ideal vision of rural-focused immigration, however, there must be inter-governmental cooperation and intentional policy design. To ensure that communities can adequately support immigrant populations through a grassroots and place-based lens, 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.

Goals and Objectives

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 Ottawa, Ontario was held on February 20, 2024. As the final event in a series of four rural migration workshops, the goal in Ottawa was to facilitate a conversation on federal policy and the role of the national and provincial governments in rural policy design.

Background and Design

As part of this project, there were four workshops—each hosted in a different region across Canada—to discuss rural migration. The first workshop was hosted in June 2023 in Lethbridge, Alberta, the second took place in Antigonish, Nova Scotia in October 2023, and the third workshop was in Prince George, British Columbia in November 2023. In total, the four workshops brought together more than 60 people.

In each workshop, participants were 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. The process 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 were each 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?

In the afternoon, the participants heard a brief presentation on some of the findings from the previous three workshops. An edited copy of that presentation is available in this report. If you are interested in learning more about outcomes from the rural-based workshops, please reference the three other reports and the final report [on our website](#).

Where do we want to go?

In the first session, participants considered three questions: What are the values that inform your ideal [of immigration systems and policies]? What role do smaller and rural communities play in Canada’s immigration system? What do you think immigration should **ideally** look like in rural and smaller communities in Canada?

Outlining some ideals

The participants started with a broad discussion of values. They commented that a sense of security, predictability, stability, and overall confidence within an immigrant’s new community is important. Newcomers also need assurance that the immigration process will be fair and equitable, and that their new community offers an opportunity to grow (with the chance to offer their children a better life, own a house or start a new business). Also, the participants commented that newcomers must often accept some level of unpredictability and discomfort to experience these benefits and growth, both for themselves and their families.

Ideally, the participants called for newcomers to receive as much information about their new community as possible before arrival to ensure realistic expectations and transparency (around housing, general affordability, etc.), especially before “making the leap” to re-settle in the smaller or rural communities. By having access to this information, the participants thought that it may help boost immigrant retention rates.

The type of immigration pathways offered within the Canadian political sphere, including how these pathways can limit or promote access to services, was also discussed. Participants commented that when the Canadian government offers an immigration pathway, there needs to be adequate services to support those who arrive through that pathway. Place-based approaches can assist with this, especially through the engagement and collaboration with local stakeholders.

At a policy level, the participants praised the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot Program, especially partnerships with economic development agencies. They stated that individuals must be integrated within the community, and localized support like job search assistance and airport pickups can help. Overall, the participants stressed the need for bottom-up, place-based approaches. The issue of defining rurality was also raised by participants.

Other ideal scenarios—such as offering a clean, healthy environment for newcomers, or having peace and stability within the international system, were also mentioned by participants.

Rurality and employment

The participants commented that there are certain realities of living in a rural context that suit some individuals more than others. However, the size of the community does not necessarily reflect their capacity to accept newcomers. As the community adapts and more individuals re-settle in the region, different services—like relevant work, or the availability of different cultural foods—will likely accommodate the demographic changes.

In discussing the marketability of communities, some participants suggested that online profiles of towns and cities be created for immigrants to ‘preview’ the area before settling. Furthermore, credential recognition and immigration processes need to be transparent and attainable, and there needs to be a suitable level of economic activity within the rural community.

Next, the participants commented that employers play a key role in the rural immigration framework, but due to the complexity of the immigration system, they acknowledged the challenges employers face to understand and engage with the system. They also remarked that it can be difficult for rural communities to view immigrants beyond their economic potential, since there are often high labour needs in rural areas. Much like urban centres, rural communities also need a range of skills. The participants noted that there are labour shortages in personal support workers, cooks, the construction industry, and truck drivers (mentioned in connection to Northern Ontario).

Overall, the participants shared that rural places could provide newcomers with a sense of continuity, a sense of home and community, and a connection to green spaces and sustainable living.

Respect and belonging

Ideally, there would always be a sense of community and ‘openness’ in rural areas (which help support population growth and strengthen the overall community). Otherwise, the

participants commented that it can be quite difficult for racialized newcomers to integrate into predominantly white communities.

Overall, the participants stressed the importance of fostering respect, equity and diversity, fairness, a sense of belonging, and a welcoming environment in rural communities. By fostering more welcoming communities, the participants commented that the retention of newcomers may improve.

Next, the importance of safety for newcomers, including spaces free from discrimination and the potential for hate crimes, was highlighted. The participants commented that individuals should feel safe to practice their religion, dress how they like, and express who they are wherever they settle. One participant suggested publishing local police statistics to aid in the outward communication of a community as safe and secure.

The ‘trade-offs’ of settling in a smaller centre were also reflected on. As the participants noted, while there may be a small group of people who have similar cultural or religious backgrounds in rural centres, once more people decide to settle in a region, others often join them (having a multiplying effect).

Lastly, the participants recognized the issue of White saviorism in Canadian communities.

Services and community preparedness

Ensuring the community is ‘prepared’ to accept immigrants—through place-based approaches, stakeholder engagement, and appropriate ‘matching’ of families with the community—was also mentioned. The participants commented that there needs to be predictability, stability, and some level of economic growth in any community accepting newcomers. Therefore, rural and smaller centres have a role in ensuring their communities are accessible and livable for newcomers. It was noted that past policies have focused on community preparedness by targeting approaches to local schools and service delivery centres.

A rural refugee resettlement plan can also support this vision. Rather than focusing on the settlement of one family, it was proposed that a community-level focus could help ensure a community is adequately prepared to accept multiple families (or individuals).

Service accessibility, availability, and variety was another key theme of discussion. The participants stressed the necessity of accessible services (i.e., through virtual offerings, partnerships between communities or agencies, or regional hubs, etc.), and in many cases, the importance of offering in-person settlement services to avoid confusion and frustration from speaking over the phone. Participants commented that settlement services can be focal points in rural centres, and there should be efforts made by service agencies to build social connections and host community-led initiatives.

Ideally, the participants noted that the community should have local amenities (i.e., things to do), local services (e.g., English language support integrated within everyday services like daycare or healthcare), and local infrastructure (e.g., access to a hospital, healthcare, and doctors). If it is not possible to have settlement services in every community, the participants

suggested that we engage non-traditional organizations that are already within the community (such as economic development agencies) or use other provincial and federal agencies like Service Canada to support service delivery. Regional service hubs are also an option, so long as there are adequate transportation networks to access the regional settlement services.

As such, the participants stressed that the availability, reliability, and accessibility of transportation is critical. Distance is also important to consider; long bus rides to service centres can act as a barrier to access, along with a reliance on taxis or the generosity of neighbors. A series of strategies were proposed, including rural Uber-like programs, carpooling, or a revitalization of train or bike networks. In doing so, the participants noted that newcomers should also be supported to explore the local area (e.g., through recreational activities like canoeing, camping, or hiking).

Finally, the value of education was highlighted by participants. They commented that the presence of post-secondary institutions in communities can help with family retention (when the kids enroll in school) and the arrival of international students.

It was highlighted that there should be investments into all schools in the community, not just post-secondary institutions. As previously mentioned, the participants noted that some settlement service should be delivered through schools, since they are often connection points to newly settled families.

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 assumptions about rural and urban spaces are held by policymakers and governments? What barriers, challenges and roadblocks are preventing you/your organization from achieving your ideal vision for immigration? Participants were then asked to distinguish between things that local communities have influence over and things that they do not, as well as to identify who has control over each issue.

Primary audiences

The participants identified a variety of stakeholders related to rural immigration, including health providers, the general community, employers and others within the private sector, and faith-based organizations. In particular, the role of the municipal government was discussed. The participants noted that municipalities can help facilitate local strategies to immigration, develop diversity plans and events (e.g., by hosting a local multicultural festival), and manage local services and amenities. The participants commented that accessible municipal services, such as being open late on some days or ensuring amenities are open on different faith holidays, is also important. Considering that provincial strategies may be less relevant to specific communities, local approaches to rural immigration was highlighted by participants as a key strategy. Local schools, which are at risk of closing in some rural communities if they do not enroll enough students, were also highlighted as a stakeholder.

In small communities, people often check in on one another. The participants noted that, ideally, people will knock on their neighbors' door to ensure people are getting the support they need. Nevertheless, the participants commented on the importance of 'one portal' to access relevant settlement services and information. While this requires some extra coordination, it can help streamline the process within a rural context.

Additionally, prospective migrants, friends in the community, secondary migrants, and organizational partners and community groups in urban centres that support rural-based work were discussed as stakeholders. The participants also reflected on the role of employers and industry partners, especially within the context of newcomers 'breaking into' a new industry. In the mining industry, for example, they commented that unions can be resistant to newcomers, especially since it is often multi-generational work. While it is a phenomenon that is not unique to the mining industry, this was identified as a potential barrier.

Barriers

Later, the discussion shifted to some of the barriers experienced by newcomers in rural areas. They commented that the local immigration partnership model can be used to address some of these challenges, but other factors, like the cost of living, are difficult to control. Other political barriers, such as tension between the political arm of government and public servants, or the prevalence of risk-averse governments, pose additional challenges outside of the community's control. The participants recommended leveraging communities of practice and relationships of mutual support, while also recognizing the audience and role of 'success stories' in policy- and change-making. Overall, it was noted that policy design can also present new opportunities.

Another key barrier was observed to be newcomers' lack of "Canadian-way" experiences (e.g., when applying for work, an individual may have relevant work experience, but it may not have been based in Canada). The participants noted that different norms and expectations may exist within the Canadian context, and to avoid frustration or confrontation, these need to be learned. Students are often exposed to these norms, but employers are less likely to provide support for cultural adaptation or education. The participants discussed that newcomers may feel as though they have been "thrown into the deep end" by not having enough training, but the availability of more internship opportunities or employer support could help with this.

The role of the employer was determined to be quite complicated. In some cases, the employer handles nearly everything relevant to the newcomers' settlement in the community (including accommodations, family support, etc.), but other employers either do not want to or do not have the capacity. The participants also questioned the ethical implications of employers having too much control over the immigration process, as it makes individuals more vulnerable.

Lastly, how a community responds to these 'unknowns' is very important. When faced with a challenge (like a new immigrant needing support to set up a bank account), supporters in the community need to be adaptable. Programs and policies must respond to the unique needs of immigrants, while also ensuring that settlement workers do not become burnt out and immigrants do not become scapegoats for other community issues (like housing shortages).

Key assumptions

Later, several assumptions about rural areas were discussed. First, the participants commented that people often assume the rural centres are more affordable, but the housing crisis is widespread. Additionally, the notion that immigrants are ‘taking the housing’ was another assumption that the participants observed.

The participants noted that rural communities are framed as being more racist or less tolerant to diversity than urban areas, but this issue often exists everywhere. Others assume that there are limited job opportunities in rural areas, which may not be true. Stereotypes were another point of discussion, including the idea that everyone who immigrated from the same country gets along with one another or wants to be together.

Service access has its own set of assumptions. Some participants mentioned that there is an ongoing debate about the effectiveness of in-person versus virtual services, whereas others wonder about where to affect meaningful service changes. The participants noted that some people assume immigrants are drawn to the availability of services in a community, but it was proposed that people are often drawn to welcoming areas and human capital instead.

It was observed that policymakers also hold assumptions about rural places. They sometimes view rural and smaller communities as less progressive, less welcoming, or less desirable, when in fact none of those beliefs may be true.

The participants expanded the discussion by highlighting some other rural realities, such as the impacts of aging populations. Day-to-day things—like trying to buy a vehicle—can be difficult for newcomers, but overall, challenges in the community can often impact everyone (e.g., everyone may need access to essential community services like food banks). The expansion of broadband internet also helped rural centres (offering greater flexibility in where people can live and work), especially during the pandemic.

Furthermore, the participants commented that immigrant homeownership should be a priority. Unfortunately, however, when housing developers do not target rural communities, less people are able to move to the area. The participants highlighted how this creates a ‘chicken-and-egg’ problem when it comes to affordable housing.

Local Immigration Partnership funding

The participants also highlighted the challenges faced by Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs) to determine *how* to allocate the funding they receive. With time limits on the funding, the participants noted that more guidance is needed for LIP administrators. Additionally, while there have been some efforts at national coordination of LIPs, communication between communities continues to be a challenge. In response, the participants emphasized the need for place-based flexibility, in addition to administrative support and guidance.

The role of the municipality

Lastly, the participants highlighted some of the challenges of engaging municipalities in immigration processes. Small municipalities, many of whom are expected to tackle ‘big projects’ related to immigration in their region, often have more experience with smaller,

more localized issues (i.e., maintaining roads, plowing snow, etc.). As such, the participants commented that policymakers cannot expect that municipalities will know how to support immigrant programs, and there needs to be some local will to engage in the process.

Nevertheless, relevant policy needs to be informed by rural perspectives and adopt various 'lenses' (e.g., rural lens, cultural lens, francophone lens, etc.). Communities should be able to choose whether they want to take part in new programs, and more funding should be provided for the implementation of new initiatives and long-term projects. When adopting a rural lens, the participants remarked that it may reveal the following things:

- the program thresholds are too high,
- the adoption of a ranked scale, which compares small communities against larger ones, does not work,
- rural communities need different forms of funding,
- the program requirements are too complex or too difficult to access,
- or a rural stream needed is needed for a certain program.

Lastly, the participants commented on the lack of opportunities or mechanisms to “try out” a rural community before moving there, including limited opportunities to visit. For some individuals, this may mean they are unaware of alternative settlement options or communities.

Policy perspectives

Lastly, participants highlighted several policy strategies and legislative challenges for rural immigration. They noted that some communities can be resistant to new ideas, so policy strategies must often succeed with one area and then be built up through partnership with others. There also seems to be a general trend of policymakers looking to engage rural and smaller centres, although it was noted that the provinces could be doing more to mirror this shift.

The participants noted that policymakers have become increasingly risk-averse and highlighted the challenge of considering the full complexity of policies. As such, they discussed the need for policy to be flexible and adaptable to suit each community's needs.

In addition to specific policies, it was noted that governments must also be flexible and adaptable. In a federal system, governments need to be able to collaborate with one another (especially on key issues, like supporting international students) to form a united and interconnected system. Meaningful connections with stakeholders, offering community-level flexibility to policies and models, and working against the divisions within government were all discussed as potential solutions.

What are we missing?

For the afternoon session, the participants were asked to consider a series of questions as they related to the barriers and challenges previously identified, such as: What are the 'known' unknowns? What are the 'unknown' unknowns? As the conversation progressed, the participants also considered: What are the things people aren't thinking of when talking about rural immigration? What are the unspoken realities? The following section is an overview of emergent themes.

In this session, some of the participants recognized their positionality as individuals who were not from rural areas, but who offered commentary due to their professional expertise.

Attitudes

The attitudes within rural communities, and within the Canadian context overall, can be a key 'unknown' in conversations about immigration. It can be difficult to measure or cross-compare how welcoming (or racist) a community may be, and as such, expectations about rural settlement need to be tempered. Questions were raised about the use of immigration to address population challenges in Canada (that may be more pronounced in rural places) specifically regarding aging and declining populations.

Adapting to the attitudes among immigrant communities was another area of discussion. For example, in June for Pride Month, it was shared that some Islamic families kept their children home from school due to different beliefs around the issue. The participants commented on the challenge of respecting others' faith and religion, especially when some long-term community members view themselves as accommodating of others, but view newcomer families as not reciprocal of similar cultural accommodations. Moreover, rural communities may still have strong Christian-based holiday celebrations or traditions, whereas urban centres offer more cultural diversity.

Scarcity mentality

The participants highlighted the 'scarcity' mentality prevalent within some rural communities, which argues that resources are finite, and that the distribution (to immigrant populations) may be misplaced. This relates to the notion that, if the community is struggling already (e.g., with housing or clean water), why should immigrants receive extra support?

Anti-immigration rhetoric

The politicization of immigration and resettlement policies has created spaces of anti-immigration rhetoric. Participants commented on the overlap in these issues with other current events, such as the "Freedom Truck Convoy" in Ottawa in 2022. They noted the unfortunate connotations of the Canadian flag with these movements, which may still represent an unwelcoming space to some people. Harsh, politicized language, such as an "F-- Trudeau" sign on the highway, may also mark a space as unwelcoming or anti-immigrant.

As such, participants raised the uncomfortable question, 'How much of this [rhetoric] was already brewing under the surface and now has a platform [through 'freedom' movements

or anti-Trudeau campaigns] for these sentiments?’ The participants noted how the prevalence of this discourse is also normalizing it, creating a space of social acceptability for crude or antagonistic rhetoric to be shared in public. President Donald Trump was seen to be a catalyst for this shift, but it was noted that these discourses are also happening in other parts of the world, such as Europe. As such, it is important to not only understand the historical context of immigration within Canada, but to also care about politics and political shifts.

Employment and integration

Many other ‘unknowns’ of immigration are based on the economic landscape and ambitions for rural revitalization. In some sectors, there can be a high turnover of employees and different wages. Newcomers may not want the jobs available, and jurisdictional and governmental barriers (such as credential recognition) may pose additional challenges. It was noted that some credential recognition can become ‘gatekeeping’ from professional organizations, and it must be ensured that narratives about jobs be clearly communicated to newcomers. Too much focus on the principal applicant, rather than the needs of the entire family, can cause issues as well.

Racism within places of employment was another key issue raised by participants. There is an idea that some immigrants are ‘more valuable’ than others. This is often framed in terms of economic value, but there are racial undertones to this debate (i.e., communities being more welcoming to Ukrainians than other immigrants). The racism can either be masked or quite overt, such as when a local business owner wants someone who ‘looks like them’ to take over the business. If a business closes, however, it may also create space in the market for immigrant-led businesses.

In communities with high unemployment rates, the participants commented on some resistance to immigration among local community members. To address this issue holistically, it is important that all aspects of rural communities are supported, so everyone can afford to stay, live, and work in the region.

Knowledge-sharing and misinformation

In an ideal sense, the participants noted that there would be consistent information sharing between well-established service providers and communities. From the perspective of policymakers, increased collaboration and information sharing would assist with rural policy design. These processes should be inclusive of the direct rural perspectives and designed in a holistic way. In this sense, there should be an ‘opening up’ of the federal government. The participants also commented that faith-based approaches to supporting rural immigration should be considered and utilized more.

In addition to knowledge-sharing, the participants highlighted several other emerging needs in rural communities. First, resources are often stretched in rural centres even before the arrival of new residents. While this presents barriers for everyone, the participants also raised the question, ‘Why would newcomers want to settle in rural areas if other Canadians are migrating to larger centres?’

Fraudulent information about the settlement region or the Canadian immigration process (e.g., agencies claiming they know “easy pathways to Canada”) make potential newcomers susceptible to exploitation or misinformation. The participants remarked that the sheer amount of information on immigration process makes it easy to scam individuals, but there remains the challenge of how to address this issue (especially if it is taking place overseas or through consultations). With the false impression of hope, it is evident that this misinformation must be addressed.

Funding and systematic challenges

Funding and other systemic challenges remain central concerns for rural communities. There is a lack of formally funded services for newcomers in some rural areas, and it can be quite difficult to build a network of services to support the population. Ideally, there would be a consolidation of funding and inter-community collaboration. Some participants commented that employers should be expected to invest more into the immigration process and financing, given that they often benefit from the system. Others highlighted how it can be difficult to overcome jurisdictional challenges, especially for issues such as credential recognition.

Relating back to the morning’s discussion on ‘pathways’ in immigration, participants also commented that post-secondary institutions (for international students) are not viewed by the federal government as an immigration stream, but in fact, it does serve as a stepping stone to permanent settlement. By not recognizing it as a stream, however, there are no additional services provided to international students.

The participants raised other ‘unknowns,’ many of which are uncontrollable through policy. For example, they highlighted the unpredictability of climate disasters, medical crises, or other future migration events.

Unspoken realities

Later in the afternoon, several unspoken realities about immigration and the rural context were discussed. The participants highlighted how domestic policies and political choices have had far-reaching impacts in other countries, either by splitting up families or contributing to the brain drain of certain regions. This ‘brain drain’ is made worse when issues with the credential recognition process prevent skilled professionals from practicing in Canada. The participants noted that the COVID-19 pandemic showed us that political levers can be lifted when it suits the agenda.

The participants went on to highlight the unspoken reality of the ‘noble newcomer’ narrative, whereby newcomers are expected to ‘earn’ their right to be in Canada. They also commented on the inequities embedded within the immigration system (e.g., newcomers often experience different treatment based on where they immigrated from and the current political attitudes towards that region or conflict, or based on the differentiated policy responses to groups and crises (e.g., in Afghanistan versus Syria versus Ukraine)). All this impacts how we, as a nation, communicate value to people.

Another unspoken reality is that some immigration pathways to Canada are ‘better’ than others. The participants observed a preference for people who immigrated through private sponsorship or those with certain professional backgrounds (such as those who work in long-term care).

Lastly, the desire for rural communities to ‘stay rural’ was briefly discussed. The participants commented on many rural communities’ desires to remain a ‘one-school’ town or keep out big-box stores. For the Francophone minority community, it was also remarked that many people arrive in Canada speaking French, but later realize they cannot (often) live and work entirely in French.

Representation of the issues

Later, the participants shifted to the media representation of immigrants, the immigration process, and the framing of certain political issues or international conflicts. They commented that social media—including ads that reach newcomer populations online—can display negative commentary. Sometimes, the ‘scarcity’ narrative resurfaces, with Canadians feeling resentment towards immigrants over unequal resource or service distribution.

Policy responses generally account for variability and social acceptability, although this process is generally not transparent. The participants noted that racialized sentiments (such as the unspoken idea that it is easier to accept Ukrainians because they are whiter than others) is another reality that becomes wrapped up in considerations of ‘social acceptability.’

The participants also commented that there is still an archaic idea that immigrants are coming to Canada and ‘taking our jobs,’ when in fact, they help support labour shortages or address skill mismatching in the workforce. Some participants remarked that there remains a need for awareness-building at the community-level on these issues.

Over time, there has been an uncontrollable shift in the perception of issues and different people. This has also marked a shift in the politicization of people. Some participants highlighted the issues that have been overlooked (e.g., the impact of domestic immigration policies on foreign communities), while others identified what is missing from policy approaches (including equity in policy development, consideration of the cumulative impacts of policy, and differentiated messaging to different groups about how they are valued, etc.).

Indigenous engagement

Lastly, the participants shifted to a discussion on the role of Indigenous engagement within rural immigration. The relationship between treaties, First Nation communities, and immigration policies was questioned, with some participants noting that Indigenous communities may not even want to be engaged in this topic. Feelings of tokenization, or broad assumptions about how or why to have these conversations, were also observed.

The participants highlighted the potential for perceived competition and unfairness between Indigenous communities and newcomer communities. In Canadian policy, issues facing Indigenous reserves and communities are sometimes portrayed as being “solved,” but this premise ignores the ongoing hardships faced by many Indigenous people. Individuals may feel

as though newcomers are receiving more support, while Indigenous communities continue to struggle.

Nevertheless, the participants highlighted that, in a Canadian context, we cannot discuss rural immigration without discussing Indigenous communities. The capacity of these communities to consult on new projects, however, must be considered. Seeing as Indigenous people are already taxed and stretched to consult on a variety of issues, they may not want to engage in discussions that are less relevant than their local or regional concerns. Moving forward, Indigenous-newcomer relations may be another area of priority.

One participant shared a story of these complex relationships in action. They commented that a local college had built a relationship with the neighboring First Nation community, and they wanted to extend this relationship to the Local Immigration Partnership (LIP). An elder within the community did not want to engage in conversations around immigration, as they believed there were more critical issues facing their community at that time. As such, the participant commented that there is an appetite for knowledge-sharing activities, but there needs to be a discussion on the relevance of immigration to the local community. If they are agreeable, Indigenous leaders should be further and fully engaged, not just passively invited to meetings.

Overview of Rural Findings

After the group discussions, Research Associate Stacey Haugen gave a short presentation to attendees on the findings from the previous rural-focused workshops. These past workshops were held directly in the communities throughout 2023 in Lethbridge, Alberta; Antigonish, Nova Scotia; and Prince George, British Columbia.

The purpose of the presentation was to showcase the early findings of the project and reflect on the emerging themes. It was also an opportunity to bridge the gap between rural perspectives (i.e., from local settlement workers, service providers, and representatives from non-profit organizations) and the urban policymaker and academic perspectives that were represented at the Ottawa workshop. The afternoon session concluded with a short question and answer period.

Presentation

First, we discussed the ideals, aspirations, and values that were presented in the other workshops. Overall, participants in the rural areas commented on the importance of safety; the necessity of collaboration between communities, governments, agencies, and service providers; the need for flexible and adaptive systems; and the desire to create communities of belonging, more than just welcoming spaces.

Another key value was equity. On the ground, settlement workers, volunteers, municipal workers, and service providers see a lot of inequity in the immigration system, particularly with the focus on economic immigration. They also observed these trends within the points system—which rewards age and skills—and through the inequity between the different streams of immigration (i.e., refugees, economic immigrants, foreign temporary workers) and

different cultural or origin communities (i.e., Ukrainians vs. other refugees, the Syrian initiative, etc.).

Moreover, the context in which local communities are working is a fragmented system. Many feel as though they are always playing catch-up, while being directly faced with the human cost of this fragmentation (i.e., through jurisdictional issues, funding contracts, reactive rather than proactive funding, etc.).

As a general trend, it was also observed that immigrants (including foreign temporary workers) often show up in local communities and in settlement offices looking for assistance. Knowing that these individuals may have nowhere else to go, settlement workers try to assist them even without the resources, jurisdiction, extra support, or other community services necessary (especially in really small communities). This leads to high rates of burnout and disillusionment among those working in the immigration system on the ground. The settlement organizations are also seeing the human cost of separated families, and it is clear that these issues are grounded in a system largely focused on economic production and potential, rather than on the needs of people.

Evidently, this is largely a rural problem and not necessarily an immigration issue. Service gaps, infrastructure issues, and jurisdictional challenges are issues that affect everyone living in rural areas, not just immigrants. In general, the lack of a rural lens in policymaking in Canada is a major challenge that affects all rural people, including immigrants in rural places.

Plenary Discussion

In the closing session, everyone came together to discuss the themes, areas of action, and policies from throughout the day. First, the participants were asked to consider how we can design, theorize, and implement a rural mobility framework. While many goals and aspirations for rural immigration policy were shared throughout the day, the question remained how we can navigate, mitigate, and adapt existing systems to suit these goals.

Community development

It was noted that people still want to live in rural and smaller places, but there is more work to be done to make the option viable. The participants commented that investments into high-speed internet and local economic development; the creation of systematic, “one-stop” settlement services; and improved intergovernmental collaboration (including in areas of selection, policy, and services) could all help support rural revitalization.

To further support rural immigration pathways, emphasis should be placed on formalizing and supporting existing social and family pathways for newcomers, the marketability of smaller and rural communities, and engagement with municipal immigration programs. The participants highlighted that pre-existing relationships within the community (or even someone to tell newcomers what to expect before arrival), can make a difference and help with overall retention. Additionally, the participants observed that more resources are needed for employers to understand the different types of immigration talent streams and compare their organizational needs.

The participants highlighted how many of the issues discussed are *rural* challenges, not necessarily *immigration* challenges. By identifying areas of leverage (such as strong economic development) and mapping community assets, we can support rural centres. Further, the participants commented that the value of building connections and Local Immigration Partnerships should not be overlooked, and there should be ongoing conversations around attraction and retention strategies. A proposition to open an IRCC office in Northern Ontario was also mentioned.

Employment and economy

Employment, especially how immigration fits into economic outcomes, was also discussed. Some participants wondered whether economics and employment should be the starting point for immigration policy, while others argued that, by presenting a community with the economic angle of immigration, local communities can get recognition and county-level buy-in to ideas. Participants returned to the idea that individuals—regardless of skill set—must also be a ‘good fit’ for the position. By managing expectations, it can also help with recruitment. Evidently, there are still systemic labour needs in many communities, and the participants noted that certain types of employment (especially for community-oriented jobs and business, like coffee shops or local stores) are not necessarily the jobs that other Canadians want.

The participants proposed that an employer navigator tool be developed so employers can better understand the immigration talent pathways. One-on-one consultations with businesses could also be explored. Seeing as employment is integral to the immigration journey—as many immigrants will not stay in a community if they cannot find work—the local economy and general community development is highly important.

Local and regional challenges

Later, several local and regional challenges—many exacerbated by rurality or remoteness—were discussed. With farther distances in between communities and low population densities, it can be difficult to implement programs in rural municipalities. Nevertheless, the participants highlighted the importance of collaboration between these centres, many of whom often have similar challenges and experiences regarding the attraction and retention of newcomers. The participants also commented on the trend of devolving power from the federal government to the provinces, which is then transferred to the local municipalities.

Local Immigration Partnerships can be one partnership model, but other areas of leverage and points of intervention need to be examined. One participant mentioned the Pathways to Prosperity toolkit (available on www.p2pcanada.ca) as a tool for rural communities to consider the proposed metrics for a welcoming community, while others commented on the role of community champions to really bring these ideas to fruition.

Final reflections

To close out the day, the participants—each with different backgrounds in policy, academia, or settlement work—were asked to share any advice they have for others in this space. Drawing on earlier remarks, some participants highlighted the importance of collaboration

between rural communities and non-competitive relationships. They reiterated the value of locally based champions and the importance of systematic solutions and strategies for these issues.

Some participants added that more power should be devolved from the federal government to regions, giving them more control over immigration into their province, municipality, or rural community. They recommended that this bottom-up approach also include learning from the direct experiences of refugees, immigrants, and diverse people. Success stories—such as the Syrian family business, *Peace by Chocolate*, based in rural Nova Scotia—should be celebrated and shared. The short film on immigration story of four Rwandan refugees, including Bahati Ernestine Hategekimana, to Glen Haven Manor, was also mentioned.

Lastly, access to information and credible data was highlighted by participants. They suggested that Canadian research infrastructure be expanded (in part to better understand rural and urban migration trends) and that access to data be improved. They commented that this information can help communities do assessments specific to their region, as well as understand whether immigrants who moved from rural areas abroad are more likely to stay in rural communities in Canada. It was also proposed that Provincial Nominee Programs allocate more rural spots or open additional Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) offices in rural centres.

Conclusion

The workshop in Ottawa, Ontario was the final of four workshops held across Canada as part of this project. By bringing together researchers, scholars, policymakers, resettlement and immigration workers, relevant practitioners, and local decision-makers, these workshops have: (1) Built collaborative conversations around migration and mobility in rural areas; and (2) Explored how population movements, refugee resettlement, and immigration manifest in local realities.

By bringing these groups together through knowledge-sharing and priority-setting workshops, this project facilitated 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.

References

- Blake, Raymond, and Andrew Nurse, eds. 2003. *The Trajectories of Rural Life: New Perspectives on Rural Canada*. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center.
- Bobrow, D., and J. Dryzek. 1987. *Policy Analysis by Design*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Brodie, Janine. 1990. *The Political Economy of Canadian Regionalism*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Canada.
- CRRF. 2015. "State of Rural Canada." *Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation*. <http://sorc.crrf.ca/intro/>
- CRRF. 2021. "State of Rural Canada." *Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation*. <https://sorc.crrf.ca/sorc2021/>
- Epp, Roger. 2008. *We Are All Treaty People*. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press.
- Haugen, Stacey, Rachel McNally, and Lars Hallstrom. 2023. "An Evaluation of Policy Responses to Refugee Resettlement in Rural Canada." *The Journal of Rural and Community Development* 18 (2): 105-118.
- Moazzami, Bakhitar. 2015. "Strengthening Rural Canada: Fewer and Older: Population and Demographic Challenges Across Rural Canada." *Decoda Literacy Solutions*.