

Lessons in Partnering: Three BMRC-IRMU Case Studies on the Challenges and Benefits of Community-Academic Research Partnerships

POLICY PREVIEW

By

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Introduction

The challenges and benefits of community-academic research partnerships are assessed from the perspectives of community partners, academic researchers, and student research assistants. Three case studies of migrant settlement and integration in Canadian cities illustrate the challenges and benefits of community-academic partnerships.

Collaboration can serve to generate new knowledge, inform policy, enhance service provision for migrants and provide training and knowledge transfer opportunities for students, scholars, and practitioners. The case studies articulate the views of a service provider, an academic researcher, and two student research assistants who were involved in the Building Migrant Resilience in Cities/ Immigration et resilience en milieu urbain (BMRC-IRMU) partnership.

Case Study One: Migration and Resilience in York Region: Supporting flexible information access across multiple communities.

The “Migration and Resilience in York Region: Supporting flexible information access across multiple communities” project aimed to document how access to information influenced collective resilience, settlement, and social inclusion among Yazidi refugees and Turkish-speaking refugee claimants in York Region. A collaboration between the United Way Greater Toronto represented by Trisha Scantlebury, Laura McDonough, and Isabel Cascante, and York University represented by Michaela Hynie, and four research assistants, Gulay Kilicaslan, Cansu Ekmekcioglu, Palmer Taylor, and Chelsey Heins, the team focused on the role of information in resilience.

The case study highlighted newcomers' strategies to access to timely, accurate, and relevant information as a form of ‘collective resilience,’ and the capacity for groups to overcome social or environmental challenges through agency, social learning, and adaptability. The team also recognized a major

challenge in supporting information access: the settlement needs of international migrants settling in Canadian cities continuously shift as migrants’ educational attainments, language skills, migration histories, and other social characteristics change. The case study therefore addressed four questions:

1. How do newcomer communities in York Region access information about the services they need and use?
2. How do service providers in York Region navigate and disseminate information for their clients?
3. How have organizations in York Region adjusted to the changing needs of newcomers?
4. How do institutions stay relevant, culturally appropriate, and ready to serve arriving migrants with distinct migration histories and social characteristics?

Approach & Implementation

Consultations with newcomer serving agencies in York Region identified concerns about two migrant communities. Yazidi refugees, a historically marginalized community resettled from Northern Iraq, had experienced persecution by IS/Daesh, including mass murder, abduction, and sexual and gender-based violence, and needed specialized settlement services and supports to respond to complex histories of trauma and displacement. Turkish-speaking refugee claimants, had rapidly increased in number in York Region but had little engagement with service provider agencies. Through the consultations, 14 agency representatives formed an advisory committee that was consulted regularly on all stages of the study.

Semi-structured interviews about settlement needs and information seeking strategies were conducted with 8 Yazidi (3 women) and 8 Turkish-speaking (5 women) newcomers in Kurmanji, Turkish and English. These were

supplemented by two key informant interviews and a focus group with 15 service providers. In addition, 8 informal support providers such as community volunteers and independent activists for the Yazidi (N = 5) and Turkish-speaking (N = 3) communities were also interviewed about their responses to the two groups' needs for services and supports.

Findings

The study highlighted the central role of migrants' information-seeking strategies in collective resilience. As noted by Rayes et al. (2016), Yazidi and Turkish migrants in York Region preferred close networks as information sources. Access to other information sources was impeded by mistrust, social isolation, and a lack of familiarity, in line with other research with newcomers Caidi (2008). Gender emerged as an issue shaping information access among the Yazidi participants; women from this and other traditional communities can face particular challenges around access to formal education, and thus literacy and language acquisition also shape their information access strategies and opportunities.

Trust emerged as a central factor in the information seeking strategies of Yazidi refugees and Turkish-speaking refugee claimants in York Region. Trust in information sources was shaped by newcomers' social networks and formal agencies' capacity to meet newcomers' needs, as well as pre-migration social and political factors. Addressing the role that each could play in enhancing mutual support was suggested as a promising way to ensure access to relevant and useful information.

Challenges of Partnering

According to Trisha Scantlebury, the United Way project lead, all participants in the case study faced scheduling conflicts. Differences in academic and community agency schedules delayed project activities and progress. At times,

academic researchers had to step away from the project to fulfill academic obligations, including course-related work. Similarly, there were times when community collaborators had to attend to pressing deadlines of other projects. The MA and PhD candidates who provided crucial research assistance became less available to support the community partner and advance the research when academic responsibilities and deadlines took priority.

Benefits of Partnering

According to Scantlebury, the diversity of perspectives afforded by the collaboration between a community service provider and academic researchers was a major benefit that strengthened the research design and data analysis. The United Way brought a practical, agency and community services sector perspective of newcomer experiences to the work, while York University provided an academic and theoretical perspective. The partnership and the research benefitted greatly from these different points of view.

The United Way staff also benefited from working with graduate students, who introduced new research methods, software, and analytical tools. The students, in turn, gained invaluable experience with service providers, their research needs, and the process of translating research into practice.

Case Study Two: The Vivons nos quartiers initiative (VNQ)

Evaluating a five-year action research project entitled, "Résilience et immigration à L'échelle du quartier", this case study aimed to identify best practices for the inclusion of newcomers in Montreal neighbourhoods. In addition to a continuing flow of economic class and family class immigrants, Montreal has recently welcomed vulnerable Syrian refugees and large numbers of refugee claimants with precarious status. To settle and integrate these immigrants

and refugee claimants required innovative policies that were initiated by the TCRI and Centraide (United Way) of Greater Montreal under the *Vivons nos quartiers* project.

The project offered neighbourhood level support to promote welcoming and inclusive neighbourhoods through training for front-line workers in each neighbourhood, the establishment and support of communities of practice for front-line workers, and awareness-raising and citizen bridging activities that evolved into training for facilitators of citizen bridging activities. The research aimed to inspire local actors and encourage workers in different sectors to address the challenge of immigrant integration at the neighbourhood level.

In the first phase, the project assessed the implementation of the *Vivons nos quartiers* initiative (VNQ), led by the Table de concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes (TCRI) and Centraide (United Way) of Greater Montreal. The second phase documented the policies for creating “welcoming communities.” (Schmidtke 2019). The project team included Chedly Belkhodja, Gabrielle Désilets, Florence Bourdeau, Stephan Reichhold, Pierre-Constantin Charles, Anna Goudet, Alexandra Charette, and Catherine Paquette. The description of the case study draws mainly on the views of Chedly Belkhodja, a Professor in the School of Community and Public Affairs at Concordia University.

Approach & Implementation

The TCRI led the implementation of the *Vivons nos quartiers* initiative while the research team actively participated in field activities and meetings. Adopting an ethnographic approach, the researchers undertook detailed participatory observation and semi-directed interviews in two phases:

- In Phase 1 (2017-2018), researchers prioritized participatory observation engaging in more than 180 hours of meetings, working committees, and citizen activities in over 13 Montreal neighborhoods. Researchers observed training sessions for service providers, meetings between key neighborhood actors, conferences, forums, and citizen activities, as well as meetings of the *Vivons nos quartiers* steering and advisory committees.
- In Phase 2 (2018-2019), researchers conducted individual and group interviews and documented public awareness activities in participating neighbourhoods.

Findings

The project provided detailed insight into the local settlement and integration of migrants with various immigrant statuses. Phase 1 of the research confirmed found that community workers were generally confused and misinformed about the rights related to migrants’ legal status as Esses et al. (2010) found.

Moreover, Phase 1 of the research confirmed:

1. The sharp increase in the number of newcomers to Montreal has led to changes in services, including the addition of new resources and the hiring of new employees who need training.
2. Workers need ongoing mentoring and training, as the trajectories of newcomers change, policies and laws evolve, and new institutional actors have emerged. In Phase 1, researchers found that community workers were generally confused and misinformed about the rights related to a migrant’s legal status.

The study called for training workers to improve their understanding of migrant status.

3. Partnerships fostering access to formal and informal networks for frontline service providers (officials, social and health services, educational institutions, etc.) and for migrants facilitate adaptation and the resilience of neighbourhoods. These networks speed up information sharing. When actors in different sectors in the same neighbourhood are brought together, they get to know each other and share information. The training provided by the *Vivons nos quartiers* project encouraged service providers to form ties with other actors in the neighbourhood and to pool their strengths and services, maximizing resources on the ground. These practices of inclusion fostered the welcome extended to migrants and the resilience of agencies by helping service providers become better equipped and prepared to respond to the needs of refugees, other migrants, and immigrants. Analyses conducted by the *Vivons nos quartiers* team enhanced knowledge of reception and settlement dynamics in Quebec. Governance at the national and provincial levels has tangible impacts on the living conditions and social inclusion of newcomers, especially those with precarious status. The analyses also showed how concerted action at the local level, often by workers from multiple sectors, may fill gaps in services and programs.

Challenges of Partnering

The lengthy duration of the project that lasted for approximately five years presented some challenges. Several members of the research team including community partners, graduate research assistants, and postdoctoral fellows departed. The changes in the team affected its ability to complete the research and delayed dissemination of the findings.

Benefits of Partnering

According to Dr. Belkhodja, some of the advantages of this community-academic partnership include collaborating with and establishing long-term partnerships with a range of partners. The *Vivons nos quartiers* initiative reinforced and strengthened working partnerships between Concordia University, York University, and other academic institutions and the TCRI and other agencies providing services to migrants and asylum seekers.

Three graduate students benefited from participating in a large-scale project as research assistants. As participants and observers, they learned how to apply theory to practice.

One of the greatest benefits of this partnership was the co-production of research that subsequently influenced the debate around the integration of more vulnerable immigrants in Montreal (e.g., from the arrival of Syrian refugees to the asylum seekers on Roxham Road). The research generated by this community-academic partnership served to counter local fears of asylum seekers. The partnership also contributed practical information about effective ways to expand the capacity of neighbourhoods to welcome asylum seekers.

Case Study Three: Stalled Mobility? Income Inequality and Intergenerational Relationships Among Newcomer South Asian and Chinese Households in York Region

The third case study focuses on the views and perceptions of two student research assistants, Janice Phonepraseuth and Jana Borras to identify some of the challenges and benefits of student involvement in research partnerships. In addition to the two doctoral students, the team included Nancy Mandell, Larry Lam, Amber Gazso, and Guida Man.

The research project entitled “Stalled Mobility? Income Inequality and Intergenerational Relationships Among Newcomer South Asian and Chinese Households in York Region” sought to explain how income inequality is experienced by different generations living in the same household of recent Chinese and South Asian immigrants. The impacts of the social, economic, and cultural capital and strategies employed by immigrant South Asian and Chinese households on their survival and inter-generational family relationships were compared, especially in terms of younger generations’ opportunities for income mobility. Lastly, it explored how inter-generational family relationships are preserved or strained by the income strategies of newcomers.

Approach & Implementation

In addition to a detailed review of over 150 academic and non-academic articles, books, book chapters and reports concerning settlement, integration, and family among other topics, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 33 South Asian participants and 39 Chinese participants, in person or by telephone. Participants were recruited through social networks and social media. Student assistants were responsible for much of the literature review, recruiting, interviews, preparing and coding transcripts, and some interpretation of findings.

Findings

Many immigrants encounter economic insecurity during settlement in Canada that

contributes to considerable strains and stresses within their families. The study shows that these challenges may be exacerbated by generational differences within families that simultaneously, provide enormous sources of support and act as buffers against financial insecurity, systemic racism, and gender inequities. The main findings include:

As expected, multigenerational and extended families serve as both sources of emotional, financial, and instrumental support and stress for every age group and in every stage of settlement.

Racial discrimination depresses wages for youth and adults who support their families financially.

Within the family, seniors rely on adult children and grandchildren for material survival, or vice versa. Cultural norms and traditions tend to disproportionately assign domestic responsibilities to women of all ages. Youth, adults, and seniors are less likely to rely on formal and informal settlement services, and more likely to rely on family, friends, and communities for information and help in navigating life in Canada.

Youth, adults, and seniors in this study faced different but overlapping settlement challenges as follows:

- Youth, including international students, face challenges with navigating the school system and finding part-time employment, in addition to experiencing loneliness, isolation, and depression. They also face high tuition fees, inadequate government financial support, difficulty transitioning to full-time employment, and high costs of living.
- Adults, usually mothers, struggle to find adequate childcare. Adults also experience credentialism and anxiety over the well-being of their families and

struggle to find stable full-time employment commensurate with their educational credentials and work experience. They remain concentrated in racialized, precarious, and low paying “survival jobs”.

- Seniors find it difficult to access information and healthcare. Many seniors rely on their adult children for emotional, financial, and instrumental support. South Asian seniors are more likely than Chinese seniors to be dependent on their adult children. Seniors’ limited resources and lack of access to government income supports leave them dependent on adult children.

Challenges of Partnering

For the student research assistants, some of the most challenging aspects of their involvement included technical difficulties, communication challenges, honoraria transfers, and data handover. The pandemic made some of these challenges especially difficult. For example, it impacted the project’s workflow, as the research assistants encountered technical difficulties while learning to hold group meetings and communicate virtually, rather than in-person. Similarly, because some follow-up interviews were done remotely, the transfer of honoraria to participants was also an issue as the research assistants were not able to process the transfers in-person. Lastly, the research assistants relied on other students to provide data which presented some challenges including collecting all the necessary data in a timely and organized manner.

Benefits of Partnering

The research assistants benefitted greatly from participating in the partnership. More specifically, their involvement allowed them to

establish academic and community connections, learn how community organizations operate, and apply theory to practice. The experience increased their understanding of the crucial role of communities in the settlement and integration of newcomers and allowed them to learn how to collaborate across multiple sectors.

The students received “excellent” research training. They learned how to conduct and complete a community academic-research project and gained knowledge, confidence, and skills to lead research projects in the future, advocate for funding for communities, write grant applications, and implement collaborative principles in future research projects.

Finally, the students appreciated the knowledge transfer opportunities. They co-authored several publications, including book chapters, journal articles, and grey literature materials. Additionally, they participated in several conference presentations.

Conclusion

The case studies in this Policy Preview demonstrate the value of community-academic research partnerships by highlighting the benefits of these partnerships to academic researchers, practitioners and service providers, and students. As illustrated by these three case studies, community-academic research partnerships may add crucial knowledge about migrant settlement and integration and inform policies and policymakers. Joining academic and community knowledge and expertise contributes to positive outcomes in research, service provision, and training that could enhance migrant resilience and integration.

Despite their success, the case studies point to several challenges that academic-community research partnerships need to anticipate, acknowledge, and address. Early conversations about issues such as data ownership, as well as how the information will be interpreted and used

help build trust and mutual understanding of each partner's role. For instance, will students be allowed to use the data for their own research or only the project itself?

Other important topics of consideration include how to maintain partnerships, given the differences in the length of time / involvement of students and community partners. While faculty are accustomed to research projects that extend over several years, staff from community organizations and students rarely share this lengthy time horizon. Again, early conversations about how to maintain a partnership as staff and students depart is essential. Discussion of the administrative foundations needed for research that involves diverse participants, including the role of student research assistants and dedicated support staff is a key factor in establishing and maintaining a partnership. Finally, funding is crucial for successful academic-community research partnerships. Collaboration succeeds if it is well supported and does not add to uncompensated responsibilities to the workloads of community partners.

Early conversations about knowledge mobilization also strengthen partnerships by indicating a commitment to service providers and migrants themselves. Partners need to agree on forms of knowledge mobilization beyond the journal articles, book chapters, books, and conference presentations familiar to academic researchers and student assistants. Commitments to involving community partners in presentations, making presentations to service providers and other community audiences, and publishing research findings in plain-language summaries, infographics, and multimedia materials like videos increase the chances that the research will be relevant to the community, service providers, and migrants themselves.

In sum, the three case studies and the diverse views of student research assistants, an academic researcher, and a community partner underscore

the complexity of academic-community research partnerships and their tremendous benefits. Early and ongoing discussion of the research objectives, research design, findings, and dissemination along with adequate resources to develop and sustain the partnership are key to achieving the benefits of partnership described by the participants in these case studies.

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For more information about the webinar, the authors of this policy preview, please contact bmrcirmu@yorku.ca.