A BMRC RESEARCH DIGEST
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The Municipal Role in Immigration and Settlement

Contradictions and Challenges

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What you need to know

This research outlines the outsized but often overshadowed roles played by municipalities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating at the local level in the settlement and integration of international migrants in Canada. The fact that most migrants settle in urban areas underscores the importance of these local actors in migrant integration. As the COVID-19 pandemic showed collaborations promoted by Local Immigration Partnerships are key to successful municipal responses. The findings highlight the need to enhance and sustain the capacities of municipalities and NGOs.

What is this research about?

Municipalities and non-governmental organizations operating at the local level play major roles in the settlement and integration of international migrants in society. Using examples from Ontario. this study examines the many ways that municipalities and NGOs support migrants, the coordinating and connecting functions they perform, the complex relationships that exist between NGOs and municipalities, and their links, tensions and challenges with other levels of government. Special attention is paid to Local Immigration Partnerships that coordinate planning by private and public stakeholders interested in migration matters in a specific locale.

How was the research carried out?

This work draws on a critical reading of recent research about immigration/migration, municipalities, and NGOs. It develops an analysis of the largely neglected three-way relationship that exists between municipalities, NGOs, and international migrants regarding migrants' access to services and their settlement and integration. Examples from an Ontario-based study of the responses of nonprofit immigrant-serving agencies and municipalities to the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the critical dynamics between local governments and nongovernmental actors that influence migrant wellbeing.

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What have we learned from the research?

While the Federal and Provincial governments are constitutionally empowered to control and manage international migration, migrants actually settle and establish new lives in individual municipalities. As growing numbers of migrants settle outside the three historic gateway cities of Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, many move to mid-sized and small cities. The urban nature of international migration to Canada reinforces the central role of municipalities and NGOs in settlement and integration. At the municipal level, governments and NGOs provide key services and work hard to welcome migrants.

The engagement of municipalities and NGOs during the COVID-19 pandemic provides a vivid demonstration of their capacities to mobilize resources, build support networks, and foster collaborations with other institutions and actors to support temporary visa-holders and immigrants who have permanent residency. Municipalities and NGOs are prime sources of key information about the social characteristics and needs of migrant populations, especially the most recently arrived. regarding the local settlement of newcomer populations. Working with non-governmental and private sector actors enabled municipalities to pilot new initiatives to respond to an unprecedented crisis. Drawing on existing collaborations developed through Local Immigration Partnerships allowed municipalities to target services for the greatest impact.

The COVID-19 examples signal the need to bring municipal governments and the NGOs more centrally into Canadian governance structures around immigration and settlement. Their successful involvement depends on sustained funding to defray the ongoing costs of engagement and collaboration along with a commitment to equitable partnership among all three levels of government, NGOs, and private sector actors.

How can you use this research?

Recognizing and understanding that municipalities and local NGOs are key actors in migrant reception and settlement is essential for improving migrant integration and enabling migrants to achieve desired economic,social, political and cultural outcomes. This report underscores the significant role and capacities of municipalities in facilitating migrant integration. It also demonstrates the value of collaboration at the municipal level. With sustained support from federal and municipal governments, Local Immigration Partnerships provide a key forum for collaboration among government, NGO, and private sector stakeholders to identify shared goals,strategies, and policies for enhancing migrant integration that take account of local circumstances.

Who is leading this research?

Dr. Valerie Preston, York University and Dr. John Shields, Toronto Metropolitan University collaborated on this work.

Learn more

For more information about this research, see Preston, V. and Shields, J. (2024). “The Municipal Role in Immigration and Settlement: Contradictions and Challenges”. In Gabriel Eidelman, Kass Forman, Enid Slack, eds. Who Does What: The Municipal Role in Immigration. https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/138985/1/wdwpaper_no9_immigration_june_22_2024.pdf