Welcoming and Inclusive neighbourhoods for Newcomers

An analysis of focus groups finding

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Introduction

Canada is a multicultural nation which its mosaic culture has evolved over time by Aboriginals, immigrants and their descendents. This mosaic composition is made up from pieces of all cultures and ethnicities present within the society. The 2011 National Household Survey (NHS) data shows that Canada is a country that coexists from an ethno cultural mixture which is shown by its immigrant population, the ethno cultural backgrounds of its people, the visible minority population, linguistic characteristics and religious diversity (National household survey, 2011).

Immigrants play an important role in protecting the economic growth, strengthening communities and in injecting new life into the neighbourhoods. Given the ethnic and racial diversity among the recent immigrant waves and the quick change in the ethnic makeup of the Canadian population, it is necessary to build mutual support and solidarity within communities in order to have effective integration of immigrants into host communities (Galabouzi & Teelucksingh, 2010).

Welcoming communities

Creating a welcoming community for newcomers has been a focus of work to enhance their experiences upon their arrival to their receiving centers (Metropolis Halifax, 2008). Rather than stressing the responsibilities of immigrants upon arrival (e.g meeting immigration requirements, try to adapt to a new country) the focus of creating welcoming communities emphasizes the reciprocal

responsibilities of the host communities to work on facilitating the immigrants transition to life in Canada.

 A welcoming community "has a strong desire to receive newcomers and to create an environment in which they will feel at home" (National Working Group, 2007). A welcoming community works on helping the anticipated new comers meet their needs and use their capacities to enrich their hosting communities as well as build new tradition, new relationships and vibrant neighbourhoods and have a sense of belonging, safety and community pride.

This report embraces a social inclusion framework that advocates for active participation of community members through "offering a broad equality of opportunities and life chances for individuals and the achievement of basic- levels of well-being for all citizens" (World Bank Group, 2013).

About Beyond Your Front Door

The City of Lethbridge has developed a social policy "*Towards a Brighter Future*, and an *Integrated Community Sustainability Plan/Municipal Development Plan*" (Campbell, et al., 2011) which provides its citizens with stronger social infrastructure by working with neighbourhoods towards building stronger community development. Beyond Your Front Door (BYFD) is a community initiative which aims at supporting citizen engagement through building welcoming and inclusive neighbourhood within Lethbridge. The initiative encourages residents to take action in creating welcoming and inclusive environment within their communities. A pilot process began early February of

2014 in two Lethbridge neighbourhoods, Westminster and London Road, were local neighbourhood associations were invited to take action and be part of the initiative. Members of those groups emphasized the importance of such a program which recognizes the importance of social engagement in building community through its grass roots approach that promotes a strong sense of community.

Newcomer Focus Groups

Background

This report summarizes focus group findings conducted as part of the City of Lethbridge Beyond Your Front Door initiative. The purpose of the focus groups was to meet with Lethbridge's new canadian community members to hear more about their experiences, challenges, and recommendations about how to enhance their experiences in their neighbourhoods. Two focus groups were conducted with culturally diverse groups.

The interview questions for key informants were developed to create an overview of the challenges newcomers face in their neighbourhoods and what can be done to create opportunities to have more welcoming/inclusive communities.

Process and Methodology

 BYFD held two focus groups that were 1-2 hours in length each with Lethbridge newcomers. One focus group was conducted in English which had culturally

diverse participants from Middle Eastern, African, Latino and French backgrounds, and the second focus group was conducted in the participants ethnic language since key informants where mostly Bhutanese seniors who don't have high level of spoken English. For this group, an interpreter was present for translating purposes. This allowed a space for respondents to express themselves freely in a comfortable environment and increased their ability to articulate their opinions and provided an opportunity to elicit information that may be specific to their experiences.

BYFD intended to host focus groups of no more than 10 participants each, so as to maintain an environment where each participant would have the opportunity to contribute.

Recruitment for focus groups was done by word of mouth and BYFD networks, including a local settlement agency. The response to the invitation to attend focus groups was significant. The eligibility criterion for each focus group was that participants must have been in Canada 1 to 5 years. The participants were informed about the details of the process and the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation

Focus group findings

Data analysis revealed three overarching themes across the two focus groups conducted. Themes are as follows:

Theme #1: Language barrier

 Language fluency emerged as a cross cutting theme among the two groups. Participants discussed frustrations and difficulties they have encountered caused by their language deficiency. The language barrier includes various degrees of fluency which varies from not speaking English at all, to not being able to understand well and concerned about not being understood. Language can also be a barrier in more subtle ways. For example, accent was identified as a signifier of 'difference,' implying difficulty to be understood, to be listened to, to be taken seriously, and sometimes leading to discrimination. One participant stated that in her first years in Canada she used to isolate herself from her neighbours fearing that she might not be able to communicate properly, due to her non-English fluency, or the neighbours would not understand her foreign accent. Another participant shared his story about a neighbour calling the police because his kids were making noise and being too loud. He explained how embarrassed he was because he couldn't explain himself to the police and had to call a friend who speaks English to provide interpretation.

Other respondents stated that non- English fluency is associated with lack of orientation and dependency upon others. Moreover, limited ability to speak English was identified by several participants as being a barrier for acculturation, seeking employment and education.

Theme # 2: Cultural and Religious barrier

Culture and religion were raised in various ways as being another major barrier in the neighbourhoods the participants reside in. Some participants expressed that

religion and culture play a role in segregating people in neighborhoods. One participant talked about her experience of feeling isolated due to her neighbour's involvement in church activities which kept them busy and left them with no time to interact together. Another participant mentioned that some Canadian traditions such as Halloween and Christmas are not encouraged in her culture/religion and therefore played as a factor in isolating her from engaging in the events happening in her neighbourhood.

There was also some consensus that learning about Canadian culture and systems create a major challenge when arriving in Canada. Often there are significant differences between how things are done in Canada and in other countries. Cultural barriers identified include lack of knowledge of services, lack of culturally appropriate services, racism and discrimination. It was noticed that the larger the gap between the culture and religion of the newcomer group and the dominant group, the greater the potential for aspects of these to become barriers to feeling accepted and welcomed. It was also seen that the common features of the participant's culture and religion helped establish personal and community networks which they could rely on when seeking to have cultural and religious support.

Theme # 3: Ethnicity, Stigma and Discrimination barrier

Most respondents raised concerns about discriminatory practices in their neighbourhoods. They reported a number of negative experiences in which they felt isolated, stereotyped and disrespected. Similar experiences were also

encountered in other settings such as school, university, parks. ..etc. One participant who embraces the Muslim belief shared how she encounters judgmental discriminatory looks from the public because she wears a head scarf. She explains how such incidents annoy her and that she feels helpless because she cannot do anything about it.

In addition to reports of feeling stereotyped and disrespected, respondents discussed a range of experiences in which they felt neighbours were disrespectful and felt invisible to other neighbours. A few respondents described that when they tried to initiate conversations with their neigbours they get pushed away by either replying conservatively or not replying at all. It was mentioned though that in some incidents respondent's kids played a role in initiating a conversation with other neighbours when they played with other kids in the neighbourhood.

When participants were asked about the level of comfort in their neighbourhoods in relation to its ethnic makeup, there were positive and negative responses. A negative response was that for some respondents coming from an ethnic background lead to the feeling of 'otherness' which gave the perception of being stereotyped. On the other hand, a positive response was that some participants intentionally chose to live in an ethically and culturally familiar neighbourhood in order to have a sense of community belonging.

Further, many noted that not being able to communicate with neighbours contributed to feelings of isolation, loneliness and anger. One key informant shared how hard it is for her and her family to adjust in their neighbourhood. Back in her country people are very friendly and almost all neighbours know each other. She said that she wishes to leave her neighbourhood. The same

respondent also talked about the idea of being deceived by the Canadian promise to have a better life upon arrival. She discussed the many barriers new comers are challenged with in their first years in Canada. Barriers like education, income, employment and stigma all add up to increase the difficulty and complexity of the journey of immigration itself.

Although the above mentioned was experienced by the majority of participants, still, some shared positive experiences of feeling welcomed. Few newcomers' participants had neighbours welcome them to the neighbourhood, cut their grass in summer and shovel their snow in winter, share food and help them learn English.

Recommendations

The following are a number of the participants' recommended activities that they thought would help them feel welcomed in their neighbourhoods. Other welcoming activities adopted from other communities are also listed.

1. Saying "Hello" and introducing self and family.
2. Taking time to learn something new about the newcomer traditions and culture (Halifax Municipality, 2014).
3. Overcoming language barriers by talking slowly and selecting simple words (Halifax Municipality, 2014).
4. Involving newcomers in organizing a sport event, a street party or a film night for the neighbourhood.

5. Encouraging neighbourhood children to play or walk to school with the newcomer's kids

6. Answering questions about recycling, composting and garbage pickup (Halifax Municipality, 2014).

7. Sharing a dish or a recipe (Halifax Municipality 2014).

8. Inviting new comers to neighbourhood block parties and asking a long standing Canadian of the same origin to visit and explain what the event is about and what is expected of their participation.

9. In events that involve food, asking about the cultural, religious and dietary restrictions of the diverse members of the neighborhood (e.g. Halal for Muslims, vegetarian for Hindus, kosher for Jews).

10. Putting up signs and information in languages that make up the neighbourhood. (e.g. Hindi, Korean and Arabic).

11. Organizing home visits to newcomers to welcome them in the community and recruit groups that can tour them around the different sites of the city like shopping malls, business district, parks, worship places, and recreation facilities (City of Abbotsford, 2011).

12. Connecting new immigrants with the different community resources available such as educational institutions, municipality services, banks and hospitals.

13. Creating cycling or walking tours and other age-appropriate activities for seniors, home-staying caregivers and children (City of Abbotsford, 2011).

14. Showing pride in cultural identity by supporting cultural and religious celebrations and events such as Ramadan, Chinese New Year, and Ukrainian New Year in the neighbourhood.

Best Practices of Welcoming Communities

Research has identified a number of strategies to be used to enhance new comer's experiences in their new host communities. The following highlight some of these practices.

1. Welcoming populations

A welcoming population is foundational to welcoming communities. City resident's attitudes toward immigrants trigger policies that will welcome or reject. As well, newcomer experiences as welcoming and otherwise, are greatly affected by positive and negative daily encounters with the residents of their new city. The Metropolis conference at UBCO emphasized a welcoming community as being "the sum of all the newcomer's experiences" (Metropolis B.C., 2008).

A-Bringing awareness to the community

When prejudicial behaviors/attitudes are present in the society, there are a number of things that can be done to shift those unwanted attitudes and behaviours. Educational possibilities include:

- Educating the value of immigration to the public (Metropolis B.C., 2008).

- Informing city residents about the diversity existing within their community (Metropolis B.C., 2008).

- Public and curricular education on diversity which inform about diversity and how to communicate with limited English speakers, and also offer experiential learning about how to interact with diverse groups (Intercultural Society of the Central Okanagan, 2008).

- Diversity and cross-cultural sensitivity training and programs for local businesses and service providers such as the Safe Harbour program (National Working Group, 2007; ISCO interviews, 2008; AMSSA, n.d).

- Supporting and helping local service organizations such as Chamber of Commerce to invite diverse speakers to share with the public their experiences and cultures (National Working Group, 2007).

- Providing training and research at the university and college to address the problems of racism and offer more programs for the faculty and students on topics focused on diversity, intercultural communication and difference (ISCO interviews, 2008).

B-Recreational Activities

Elements that provide social and leisure opportunities and celebrate diversity of newcomers are essential. Some possibilities include:

- Create groups who work on reaching out, welcoming and befriending newcomers (National Working Group, 2007).

- Support public celebrations of diversity, culture and others that which emphasize the contributions of immigrants and bring together newcomers with long-time residents. (ISCO, 2008).

C-Welcoming and orientation

The transition into a new city can be demanding emotionally, socially and financially. Practices to ease this situation include:

- Welcoming new comers at their point of arrival in the city through connecting with agencies that funnel new arrivals into the community (National Working Group, 2007).
- Providing inexpensive housing for new comers in the first period until they can find suitable accommodation. (National Working Group, 2007).
- Providing welcoming packages that include diverse information about the city's services. (National Working Group, 2007).

D-Protecting immigrants' rights

Setting up policies and legal principles is vital in order to provide recourse when discrimination cases occur (National Working Group, 2007). Options suggested by the National Working Group include:

- Educating government officials, businesses, agencies, schools and the general public about the laws and legislation that prohibit discrimination, racism and hate crimes and the steps that should be taken if such cases occur.

- Institute and publicize policies which address issues of fair hiring, firing and employment conditions in businesses, municipality and regional district.

- Institute and publicize policies which tackle issues of discrimination and biases in teaching and in curricular materials of schools.

- Develop city by-laws which forbid discriminatory acts in public areas and recreational activities.

2. Local-level Responsibility

A- Sharing responsibility

Receiving centers of immigrants are believed to share responsibility along with immigrants in achieving successful immigration (Metropolis B.C., 2008). When welcomed appropriately, newcomers can integrate better in smaller centres than in big cities. Municipalities should take a responsibility in identifying barriers to immigration success (Metropolis B.C., 2008)

B- Supportive infrastructure

Immigrant's decision upon what community to settle in depends on two factors: family and community infrastructure. Thus, a key in attracting and retaining immigrants rely on building up appropriate and supportive infrastructure. Finding more resources to support immigrants such as advocacy and awareness of rights are some aspects of that infrastructure (Metropolis B.C., 2008).

Other aspects of this infrastructure as suggested by Bahbhani (2008) include:

- Culturally appropriate and affordable daycare.

- Seniors programs.

- Prenatal and parenting activities/classes.

- Connecting newcomers with police officers in order to increase their feelings of security in the community.

- Information on public safety.

- Immigrant's resources provided through the public libraries.

3. Strategic Partnerships with Diverse Groups

A-Partnership with diverse groups

One important key aspect of creating welcoming communities is building strategic partnerships with diverse groups. The first step towards this would be involving different individuals, community organizations and agencies who want to be welcoming, such as educational institutions, business groups, settlement agencies and public schools, and this will require each sector to prepare itself to adapt to the needs of new immigrants (Bahbhani, 2008). This will be needed as newcomers will interact with all aspects of their new home.

B-Linguistically welcoming community

Key elements of becoming linguistically welcoming include:

- Use of signage in multiple languages (Bahbhani, 2008).

- Use of more inclusive advertising and inclusive language that represent diverse cultures (Changing Faces interviews, 2008).

- Translating the websites for the city and city services into other languages (Bahbhani, 2008).

- Providing multilingual employees or interpretation services at key government agencies (Bahbhani, 2008).

- Staffing businesses with some speakers of other languages (Bahbhani, 2008).

- Sharing of translated materials between businesses and agencies in the city in order to avoid duplication of the work (ISCO focus groups, 2008).

Conclusion

Although it is vital to address and meet newcomers pressing needs and challenges in their first months in Canada, yet, bringing successful immigration experience requires a bigger vision. A long term vision is a foundation of a truly welcoming community which will influence the different areas of action. An important aspect of this vision is focusing on ongoing research and evaluation (Bahbhani, 2008). This is a key element in this process since it will help evaluate how the city is doing in terms of moving forward towards building immigrant's integration and welcoming behaviours in the community. Moreover, research and evaluation will help gather feedback from immigrants about their experiences and then integrate them into the planning process in order to refine the city practices and become a truly welcoming society (Bahbhani, 2008).

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