

Leveraging Immigrants' Contributions for Greater Equity & Inclusion

OLIP Forum: Speaking Notes

October 1, 2012

Thank you for the opportunity to spend time with you and share some of my thoughts (based on research and long professional practice within the social services sector). Before I start, I would like us to take a moment and thank the OLIP team for organizing this forum and for bringing us together to deliberate on these important matters in our community.

Immigrants are assets to our city, their civic contributions improve our overall wellbeing, and their gifts transform our communities every day. However, these contributions are not evident to all of us because we tend to focus on the needs and deficiencies rather than on their contributions.

In this short presentation, I will share stories that clearly articulate the immigrants contributions in our community and highlight some of the ways I think we can leverage them.

Story #1: Many years ago, I interviewed a woman (Let's call her Cosob) as part of my Ph.D. research. Cosob came to Canada as a refugee just few years prior to the interview. She was an economist who had a senior government post that involved traveling all over the world before she came to Canada. Like many immigrants, Cosob difficulties integrating to the labour market.

Based on the questionnaires I had developed, I planned the interview to take 1 to 1.5 hours maximum. I ended up being at this woman's house for over 6 hours. We were interrupted many times over the course of the interview. I was intrigued by the fact that Cosob's home was a hub of a community. People stopped by to ask advice, to share challenges they were facing in their families or in the community, or just to have

tea with her and take a break. Cosob never showed impatience for the interruptions. On the contrary, Cosob showed kindness and love to every person who walked into her home. Cosob and how she interacted and provided support to her guests exemplifies a community living that we rarely get to see.

Since then (both as my research progressed and through my professional work in the social services sector) I have learned that what Maria was doing was neither really unique nor out of the ordinary for many immigrants in our communities. It is very common to have families whose homes are open for people to visit, to share the burdens of living in a new environment, and to get support and advice.

In addition to personal homes being spaces where people's humanity and their sense of self is affirmed and validated, where they are heard without judgement, and where they find unconditional support, there are civic institutions that immigrants initiate and run in our neighbourhoods. These institutions include home work clubs to provide space for both parents and students to do their home works and succeed in their academic or professional retraining journey; study groups, mother's and father's groups, prayer groups etc. Immigrants also initiate social and recreational activities to support specific demographic groups including youth, women, and seniors.

Now let me tell you another story of giving and contribution: this one is about a young woman (let's call her Maria) who came to Canada as a refugee right after she graduated from teacher's college. Maria loved teaching and in her practicum years she learned that she was really good at it. Like Cosob, she was not able to integrate into the labour market.

Initially, Maria was a bit confused about the fact that in spite of her qualifications (which included speaking five languages and diplomas in management, business, and international relations) she was not being hired as a teacher immediately. She decided not to give up but reach out to her new community and introduce herself. It must be

noted that having the advantages of being young and with no children made her experience a bit easier.

So she decided, even though she really was not invited to give and contribute, she will use the gifts she brought to Canada to serve others. Maria committed to helping refugees make sense of the traumatic experiences of displacements, dislocation, fragmentation of families, and loss of home through community outreach activities and through the development of social, recreational, and educational programs for youth. She started being active: sitting on various committees including Boards....

These stories speak to how immigrants, through their sense of community, social connections, and responsibility to one another, bring strong family values, and support for communities at large. Immigrant initiated and run community and civic institutions exemplified by the stories I shared are found in our neighbourhoods in every corner of our city. They are concrete examples of civic contributions we do not see, acknowledge, and learn from...

There are powerful and emerging studies that demonstrate the positive impact of robust community connections. For example, in his book, *The Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell shares the story of the *Rosetans*, an immigrant group from Roseto, Italy that settled in America in the late 19th century. The Rosetans have demonstrated that a strong commitment to observing their community values; inter-generational living, spiritual wellbeing and mutual respect have had surprisingly positive consequences for their health. Medical professionals have been forced to accept that that the conventionally understood causal relationship between lifestyle and health includes a critical "community" dimension that plays a role in determining health outcomes.

In these studies, there is an increasing recognition that we need to do things differently to positively impact our community's health. There seems to be a new appreciation that, to quote Feldstein, "we need to look at front porches as crime fighting tool, treat

picnics as public health efforts and see choral groups as occasions of democracy.” (www.bettertogether.org/).

I know for sure that the holistic and integrated approaches to community service that I witnessed in immigrants’ giving, sharing, and hospitality, has the potential to help us solve many of our current and urgent social challenges. These community connections are particularly critical at a time when we are experiencing a marked decline in our social capital. (Robert Putnam; 2000)

What is needed to recognize and maximize immigrants’ civic contribution?

The first step is to recognize that many immigrant communities do bring gifts of giving and generosity in addition to all the skills and education. Unfortunately, in our attempts to get immigrants “integrated” into “our culture” we tend to overlook the gifts and the cultures they bring to our communities. In addition, because of the many systemic barriers, our perception of “cultural difference”, and our biased assumptions, this civic contribution is not honoured and we do not learn from these valuable gifts that have the potential improve our overall wellbeing?

In an inclusive community, it is important to know everyone matters and to create structures that ensure all people feel they belong and immigrants are given opportunities to contribute their gifts beyond their specific communities. I would like to remind you that, as McKnight and Peter said in *the Abundant Community*, “A competent community builds on the gifts of its people. It knows that a gift is not a gift until it is given. Before it is given, it is only a beautifully wrapped box in a drawer. It is a capacity held in exile...”

How do we open these gifts and create welcoming communities. I think the first step is for us is to profoundly shift our thinking about who the immigrants are and what they

bring to our communities; then we will appreciate how they currently contribute to our communities. To achieve this goal, it is absolutely necessary to develop a research based public education campaigns to enable the general public to go beyond the everyday generalized stereotypes and understand the valuable gifts immigrants bring into our communities. This will shift how we perceive immigrants, how we relate to and interact with them, and how we engage them within our communities.

There also is a need to create structures (including within school councils, community boards, city councils etc...) that are participatory for people to fully engage in the city of Ottawa and participate in the decisions that affect them. I must say that there are many local organizations that have dedicated considerable time and resources to being more inclusive. Yet, recent consultations by OLIP indicate that despite this effort, challenges continue to persist. There is an equity project we have been working at one of the OLIP sector tables that will support organizations in their journey to be more inclusive.

This project focuses in the area of diversity, inclusion and equity touches on two relatively new and complex fields of study:

- Diversity, Inclusion and Equity; and
- Organizational Change (how to achieve real intentional change within organizations of various sizes and contexts).

I do encourage you to find out more about this project which, through the learning journey of a number of Ottawa mainstream organizations, will examine the question of inclusion with respect to four interrelated domains of organization's experience: service delivery, human resource management, and governance.

Ensuring that all voices matter means doing business very differently. It means creating spaces that invite and hear different voices and respect different perspectives. It also

means having policies as well as hiring practices and processes that ensure there is a diversity of people coming together as we move from different communities into one Ottawa community. This journey is neither easy nor quick but is a necessary and urgently needed one for the creation of an equitable and inclusive community in our city.