

“Newcomer Skills at Work: Refusing to Settle for Less”

A participatory action research report presented at the Fall 2008 OCASI Conference
October 2008

Background

The Mennonite New Life Centre of Toronto (MNLCT) is a non profit and charitable organization with twenty-five years of experience working with newcomer communities. It was founded in the Mennonite tradition of peace, justice and the service work, with a commitment to work alongside society's most vulnerable. Today the MNLCT is a vibrant organization operating in three different locations within the city of Toronto, offering a range of programs and services, such as integrated settlement counselling, language instruction, child-minding, mental health supports, youth and seniors programs, among other activities. Throughout the years of working with immigrant, refugee and non status families, the MNLCT has built empowering relations with low-income and marginalized newcomers. By doing so, it has learned about the systemic issues that negatively impact the lives of newcomers, and together with them, it has sought to advocate and call for policy changes that can bring positive transformations.

In 2007, a visioning process identified the issues of poverty and access to employment as priorities for newcomers. It also recognized the importance of community organizing and advocacy work as priorities for the future and as strategies to further engage 'clients' and staff in policy discussions. In order to move forward and secure the necessary resources to undertake this new work, a one year project proposal entitled “Newcomer Skills at Work: Refusing to Settle for Less” was presented to and approved by the Metcalf Foundation.

This project has been a step forward in strengthening the capacity of the MNLCT to respond to the needs of newcomers in relation to employment and civic engagement. It incorporates employment mentoring activities, such as capacity building workshops and facilitated group discussions among international trained professionals, while also promoting the participation of newcomers in advocacy-related efforts, particularly within the anti-poverty movement.

Participatory Action Research

A research component was added to the “Newcomer Skills at Work” project by developing a series of focus groups to explore the experiences of newcomers and settlement workers and discuss proposals for change. The staff focus group documented the opinions of 5 immigrant born workers and 2 Canadian born staff. Two separate focus groups were conducted with a total of approximately 40 newcomers from the Chinese and Latin American communities who regularly participate in programs and/or rely on services at the New Life Centre. The newcomer participants had all been living in the country no more than five years. There was diversity of age, gender, immigration status (refugees and permanent residents), political perspectives and professional backgrounds among participants. Luis Fernando Ortiz, a Colombian University Professor and newcomer to Canada, took the lead as volunteer researcher alongside a staff member of the MNLCT, Jessica Farias, to conduct the focus groups and document findings.

In light of increasing public debate on racialized poverty and precarious employment in Ontario, these focus groups are timely and relevant to public discourse. The Ontario government's declared commitment to implementing a Poverty Reduction Strategy has created momentum among community organizations working with people impacted by poverty. Campaigns like the Colour of Poverty (www.colourpoverty.ca) and Ontario Workers Need a Fair Deal (www.workersactioncentre.org) are calling for concrete changes to address the increasing poverty levels among

racialized families¹ and demanding greater protection for all workers through increasing minimum wage and strengthening the Ontario Employment Standards Act. The MNLCT focus groups were organized in the midst of rising concern for the challenges and barriers that hinder newcomers from 'succeeding' in a new society. They created the opportunity for needed reflection on what constitutes 'fair and meaningful employment', as well as the difficulties that prevent newcomers from better accessing the Canadian labour market. Finally, they provided a space for participants to recognize existing opportunities and discuss recommendations and expectations for the future.

Methodology

In the "Newcomer Skills at Work" process participants were able to interact and express their opinions, share ideas and debate concepts through individual and group exercises. Their understanding of issues was grounded primarily on direct personal experience as newcomers or workers in the settlement sector.

The focus groups had three phases. The first phase had the participants individually define and record the notion of "*immigrant success*". These definitions then fuelled group discussion on this topic.

The second phase had the participants break into small group settings and reflect on the following questions. They then reported their discussions back to the large group.

- *What does "fair and meaningful employment" look like?*
- *What are the barriers to "fair and meaningful employment"?*
- *What are the opportunities for finding "fair and meaningful employment"? How can newcomers take advantage of these opportunities?*
- *What changes are needed to allow more newcomers to succeed in finding "fair and meaningful employment"?*

The third section of the process was dedicated to discussing *recommendations and suggestions* for new programs and policy changes to improve the lives of newcomers. Participants expressed their vision for the Ontario Poverty Reduction strategy.

A Successful Newcomer

The first task for all participants was to define the concept of "immigrant success". Workers in the settlement sector identified success for newcomers by referring primarily to the following:

- ⇒ Adaptability, openness and flexibility;
- ⇒ Ability to participate, contribute and be included in social, political and economic spaces;
- ⇒ Job satisfaction;
- ⇒ Strong cultural identity;
- ⇒ Happiness;
- ⇒ Ability to communicate in official languages;
- ⇒ Equity under the law and in practice;
- ⇒ Ability to reunify with family;
- ⇒ Citizenship acquisition and learning about Canada.

During the group discussion different perceptions on the idea of success emerged. Participants reflected on their experiences working in the settlement sector as well as their own immigration experience.

¹ In Ontario poverty grew 361% between 1980-2000 among racialized families (The Colour of Poverty, 2007)

"I came to Canada a little bit more than a year ago as a skilled worker with my husband. We are not working in our field of employment. My husband works at a bank at night, while he was a lawyer back in our country of origin. He went recently to visit and when he came back he told me that he realizes now how happy he is here. Success is not only about having a dream job."

MNLCT Staff

"What can newcomers do to be successful? People should be open minded – for example, if they ask for Canadian Experience: volunteer. If you need to upgrade your skills, go and research different schools and get a certificate. I know it's hard, but you have to adapt"

MNLCT Staff



Luis Fernando Ortiz facilitates focus groups

"The onus is on the immigrant. Does success always depend on the immigrant? Or are there other factors at play? What is society doing to assist them? Immigrants are expected to adapt and succeed, but what about society also adapting, supporting and learning from immigrants." MNLCT staff

At the newcomer focus groups conducted with members of the Latin American and Chinese community, the notion of success was closely linked to the ideas of *family, community and employment*. *Happiness and wellbeing* were also particularly highlighted in the responses. The main ideas expressed by people were:

- ⇒ Fulfilment and happiness as defined by the person;
- ⇒ Job security and ability to apply skills;
- ⇒ Integration and political participation in Canada;
- ⇒ Improved opportunities and quality of life for children and family;
- ⇒ Balance between cultural identity and norms of new country;
- ⇒ Established networks and community connections, freedom from isolation;
- ⇒ Positive attitude;
- ⇒ Ability to access information relevant to immigrants;
- ⇒ Self-sufficiency and ability to satisfy needs;
- ⇒ Achievement of goals and dreams;
- ⇒ Access to training and education;
- ⇒ Recognition and appreciation.

"We can say that if an immigrant gets a job which satisfies him, he will live healthier, be able to have goals for the future and if he is able to reach them, he will feel successful"

Community Member

"Better than Before!"

Community Member



LINC students participate in focus groups

"Someone who survives, maintains hope, builds community connections, finds good work or ways to contribute their skills and gifts, exercises their voice and follows their dreams"

Community Member

"To integrate to your new surroundings is a process, we come from a different country with a different culture, when we arrive to this country we enter in shock because of the language. We want to be accepted and integrate in a new place. This includes employment and family fulfillment"

Community Member

"Success is to improve my quality of life by having employment that matches the profession I already have."

Community Member

"We need our Latin American community to succeed, we are not well organized, we need people that may speak about our issues, we need leaders and representatives"

Community Member

Fair and Meaningful Employment – Barriers and Opportunities

During the second part of the focus groups participants were asked to discuss in small groups:

What does "fair and meaningful employment" look like?

Staff of the Mennonite New Life Centre for the most part identified ideas that highlighted respect for employment standards and personal fulfillment as directly related to this question.

- ⇒ Equity and respect for law;
- ⇒ Job satisfaction and passion;
- ⇒ Adequate wages and benefits;
- ⇒ Access to training;
- ⇒ Employee awareness of rights.

Community participants in the two separate focus groups also expressed concepts of *equity* and *respect* as key to what constitutes fair and meaningful employment. These two groups also identified *the ability to work in your trained*

field of employment as crucial to meaningful employment. *Economic considerations* and *safety* at work were also expressed by participants.

- ⇒ Equal opportunity and freedom from discrimination;
- ⇒ Ability to cover basic necessities;
- ⇒ Ability to match training and experience with Canadian job;
- ⇒ Ability to further develop skills and improve professionally;
- ⇒ Job satisfaction;
- ⇒ Economic stability;
- ⇒ Good pay and benefits;
- ⇒ Healthy and safe working conditions;
- ⇒ Not living in poverty;
- ⇒ Job mobility.

When asked about the *barriers to “fair and meaningful employment”* participants actively participated in lengthy discussions and heated debates, at times becoming visibly moved by the discussion and responding to the questions by sharing personal stories or episodes that exemplified the barriers they had seen or directly experienced.

For people working in the settlement sector, the major barriers identified were:

- ⇒ Language barriers;
- ⇒ Discrimination;
- ⇒ Limited access to affordable child care;
- ⇒ Lack of networks;
- ⇒ Family pressures;
- ⇒ Non-recognition of foreign credentials;
- ⇒ Lack of goals and planning;
- ⇒ Limited access to information;
- ⇒ Unrealistic expectations of Canadian migration experience;
- ⇒ Economic system.

For community members of the Chinese and Latin American communities, the major barriers identified were:

- ⇒ Canadian work experience;
- ⇒ Communication skills;
- ⇒ Lack of local education;
- ⇒ Culture shock;
- ⇒ Immigration status (for refugee claimants);
- ⇒ Non-recognition of professional credentials by the labour market.
- ⇒ Age, gender, race discrimination;
- ⇒ Lack of mentoring programs in specific fields
- ⇒ Lack of social networks;
- ⇒ Lack of good and pertinent information about Canada.

“In my experience when I decided to come to Canada, if you come, you have to take Canada as an adventure, be grateful and have an open mind to do jobs you would never do. I took advantage of different volunteer opportunities and worked other jobs, for example I was a garbage collector but that experience built my life in Canada”

MNLC staff

"Local education, in my opinion is very important. I had three different interviews and they told me the reasons as to why I was refused were I lack local education diploma." Community Member

"Can employment be meaningful, but not necessarily fair? Not fair because the job might not follow the law or because the person is not well treated, but meaningful to the individual person because as an immigrant you have to support your family or make a lot of sacrifices, and the job allows you to have economic stability."

MNLCT staff

"Biggest problem is Canadian experience, many bosses will ask you if you have local experience, how can we answer this? We can only say that we live here and we don't have a job yet. If we do not have a job, how can we get Canadian experience? You never start. Unfair."

Community Member

"Culture shock I think is a barrier. Immigrants are from an older life style, how can we help them to cross this gap"

Community Member

"Fair and meaningful employment? A job that you are interested in and connected with your educational background, should match your education and job. But there is discrimination and stereotyping. I have been here for a short time, but I feel in this society there is discrimination. I think this is a really serious problem."

Community Member



Participant of the focus group from Chinese community

Participants were asked to elaborate on the topic of "Fair and Meaningful Employment" and to specifically explore what they felt were the *opportunities* for finding it.

*What are the opportunities for finding "fair and meaningful employment?"
How can newcomers take advantage of these opportunities?*

Both groups spent the majority of their time debating the types of government funded employment programs available.

Community members felt that the government had a strong responsibility to provide more jobs and that much of the responsibility for finding meaningful employment should on the newcomers themselves. However, both groups agreed that the government and service providers could play an important part by providing an infrastructure that supports them in the process. A summary of participant recommendations on how the government and service providing agencies can provide support is listed below:

- ⇒ **Newcomer Assistance and Advocacy Centres:** There should be more centres that distribute employment information, and particularly information about employment opportunities. Organizations that advocate for immigrants and refugees such as OCASI and CCR were perceived as helpful by settlement workers;
- ⇒ **Mentorship Programs:** Existing mentoring or bridge programs were recognized as a valuable opportunity, allowing newcomers to access the labour market faster;
- ⇒ **Education and Training:** More community college and university programs should be available so that newcomers can upgrade their skills in a timely manner. Programs of one year or less would be most useful for newcomers needing to access jobs quickly. Additionally, more professional training programs outside of colleges and universities would help newcomers enter the job market quicker;

- ⇒ **Language training:** There is a large demand for English language classes of all types. There should be more specialized English programs aside from LINC and ESL. The ability of newcomers to speak more than one language was also recognized as a strength in the existing labour market;
- ⇒ **Employment programs:** Meaningful employment can best be found if newcomers are provided with programs that provide networking opportunities, especially networking with potential employers. Also programs that arrange paid or volunteer placement positions that are directly related to each newcomer's field of expertise are valuable and should be expanded.

The last discussion specifically around fair and meaningful employment focused on the question:

What changes are needed to allow more newcomers to succeed in finding "fair and meaningful employment"?

The discussion again revolved around increasing and enhancing government funded programs, particularly to respond to the challenge of employer expectations for "Canadian experience."

The following changes were suggested in order to facilitate newcomers' ability to obtain Canadian experience or get around this barrier.

- ⇒ **Increased training:** The government needs to increase the number and accessibility of employment skills programs;
- ⇒ **Co-op/Internship placements:** If the government would create or fund placements for newcomers with companies in a vast variety of sectors, then more newcomers would get the experience they require to become familiar with the employment system in Canada. Co-op placements or paid internships for newcomers should be in both government and private companies;
- ⇒ **Credential recognition:** Changes need to be made to the manner in which credentials attained outside of the Canada are assessed and recognized. There needs to be a fair and transparent mechanism to recognize equivalent skills attained from overseas;
- ⇒ **Education campaign:** The government needs to do more to encourage employers to hire people based on their skills and abilities and not only on whether or not those skills have been demonstrated in Canada;
- ⇒ **Advocacy Efforts:** Working through existing political channels like engaging with elected representatives to discuss issues was seen as viable strategy to bring about changes.
- ⇒ **Self-talk:** Participants spoke about the need to maintain hope and a positive attitude in order to succeed in finding employment.

"To solve this kind of a problem, it is very important for most of us to go to community college and university. It is very important for most of us to improve our English ability so that we can deal with any difficult situation. Oh, and also a network is very important to many people." Community Member

"Volunteering jobs in our field is very helpful, but the key point is that it is your field. It is relevant. A step forward." Community Member

"This has to be a political process, you need to speak to MPPs & MPs to bring issues forward" MNLCT Staff



Participants of focus groups

Policy Recommendations

For the third part of the focus groups discussions, participants were encouraged to suggest ideas for changes to the current support given to newcomers to Canada. The groups were asked the following question:

- *The province of Ontario has committed to developing a poverty reduction strategy, with that in mind: what are your recommendations?;*
- *What new programs or policy changes would you like to see included in this strategy?"*

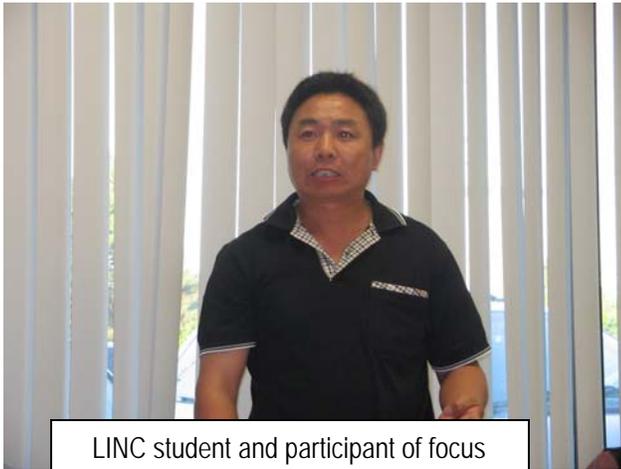
In the facilitated discussion with workers in the settlement sector, the conversation revolved around six key areas of importance:

- ✓ **Housing:** Increased effort has to be made to ensure that newcomers to Canada have access to affordable housing;
- ✓ **Defining Poverty:** For staff it was very important to be able to define and measure poverty. At the same time, it was also articulated that it could be difficult to mobilize newcomers around issues of 'poverty' as people may not self-identify as 'living in poverty' and may compare their standard of living to that of the country from which they came;
- ✓ **Employment Assistance:** Service providers should support newcomer employment networking opportunities and should increase their focus on job security and adequate conditions (instead of just setting up job placements). Specifically, it was suggested that partnering with employment counselling agencies would be beneficial.
- ✓ **Resources to meet needs:** Changes in labour legislation are needed to ensure that everyone is provided with a living wage. Social assistance rates also need to provide a family with enough money to survive;
- ✓ **Public Education/Awareness:** It is essential to have a means to share information about newcomer issues with the public;
- ✓ **Language:** LINC programs should be accessible to everyone, including Canadian citizens and refugee claimants. Furthermore, LINC programs should always consult with students to exchange expectations. LINC classes could include a strong employment component (such as learning about the labour market) to serve a dual purpose of English instruction as well as pre-employment preparations.

When the same questions were asked of the two groups of newcomers that utilized the MNLCT's services, the discussions were similar but not identical. Many of the issues identified by the staff were also discussed by the community members, but from a slightly different perspective. For the community members the following points were key foci of the discussion:

- ✓ **Support Programs:** Upon arrival in Canada, a better job should be done providing newcomers with a more thorough orientation and relevant information. Furthermore the organizations that provide resources to newcomers should be much more energetic at going out into the community and ensure that their programs are publicized in many languages in newspapers. Programs that are deemed useful by the people that use them should be increased (such as professional programs, skilled programs);
- ✓ **Rights awareness:** More emphasis should be placed on ensuring that newcomers are informed about the various types of rights they have, including employment, immigration, and housing. Efforts should also be made to increase the opportunity for newcomer communities to engage with politicians (with translation);
- ✓ **Language:** ESL & LINC programs should be available to everyone, regardless of immigration status or citizenship. (Special note that flexibility and provision of childcare is vital). LINC programs should be organized to ensure that they prepare the students for the outside world. The need for language programs is very high;
- ✓ **Support networks:** There need to be more programs to provide a wide range of support networks for newcomers. This includes employment networks as well as other social networks;

- ✓ **Employment support:** Programs that are deemed effective by the users should be increased. These programs would include mentoring, paid volunteer/internship placements, networking activities to connect newcomers with employers, and other programs that help the person seek job opportunities. Placements should be longer, and should be paid;
- ✓ **Employment environment:** While there is always a need for more jobs, it is also important that people are provided with a 'living wage' and job security with benefits. A higher minimum wage would be beneficial.
- ✓ **Access to training and education:** It was suggested that tuition fees be lowered or grants awarded to newcomers who have re-train, but also need to support their families. A community member suggested the idea of reducing income taxes for newcomers during this process.
- ✓ **Government bureaucracy:** The immigration process should be sped up. The accreditation of home-education needs to be done quicker. The social workers at Ontario Works need to be better trained.



LINC student and participant of focus group shares experiences in Canada

"We need to promote 'anti-inequality' strategies." MNLCT Staff

"In some senses, being an immigrant is equal to being in poverty. So if the government gives us more training and programs, maybe we will have more chances to be employed." Community Member

"Forcing people to work any job means that they may stay in poverty longer - immigrants just choose any labour work because they need the money. It is reality. At the same time we can't expect immigrants to only find jobs in their fields because that could take years. So in the meantime, where does the money come from?" Community Member.

"How do we define poverty in Canada? The poverty here and the poverty in the country I came from are very different." MNLCT staff

"What about proposing the idea of a forum to meet with politicians so we can present them our concerns and ideas, it is important to make it accessible in different languages so everyone can participate." Community Member

Preliminary Conclusions

From the newcomer and settlement worker focus groups, it is apparent that different cultural communities are experiencing similar issues. Although significantly different, the Chinese and Latin American communities brought up very similar barriers and both expressed a desire that things would change for the better. In all focus groups, the need for *Canadian experience* was a major factor that acted as a barrier to the successful integration of newcomers into the workforce. This was especially prominent for internationally trained professionals.

The Canadian labour market is still difficult to conquer, but community agencies have an opportunity to effect change. We are in a moment of positive momentum, where campaigns like the "Colour of Poverty" and "Ontario Workers Need a Fair Deal" are raising awareness that poverty and barriers of access to adequate employment are affecting the ability of newcomers to survive and contribute. Organizing around these issues with those who work with newcomers and with newcomers themselves will make current campaigns stronger and more relevant.

More work needs to be directed at engaging with newcomer communities in order to further understand the barriers that are preventing them from succeeding and their recommendations for change. Settlement organizations are well placed to engage newcomers on program and policy issues. Doing so will allow organizations to develop new services and programs, formulate policy recommendations and put forward creative solutions to systemic injustices faced by newcomers. This may help guarantee that all members of the community are treated fairly and that, over the long term, future newcomers will have more possibilities for success.

This report documents and expresses the voices of front line workers in the settlement sector and the diverse people they work with. It aims to inspire further discussion on the issues among other organizations.

Prepared by Jessica Farias & Luis Fernando Ortiz

