Re-thinking an asset-based support for new immigrants: A Case Study

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Abstract

An asset-based and holistic support that acknowledges the experiences, skills and capacities of new immigrants is vital to integration. Modelled on a Sustainable Livelihoods framework, this paper proposes an asset-based immigrant-integration model with six interrelated asset areas that are significant to immigrant settlement: home and family, community networks, education and career, systems access, household finances, and health and safety. Mirrored through the experiences of the participants, the discussion explores on the six asset areas and the call for a holistic approach in working with new immigrants. Results of this study indicate that helping immigrants identify their own strengths and goals and connecting them to community increases self-esteem and a sense of belonging. The self-identification of assets and attributes is a process upon which immigrants can create positive changes in their own lives and make lasting contributions to Canadian society.

Keywords: Sustainable Livelihood, Immigrants, Settlement, Integration, Employment, and Inclusion

Introduction

Settlement programs generally focus on helping immigrants integrate successfully into Canadian society within five years of their arrival. However, studies have suggested that successful integration may require strength-based and sustainable support for as long as ten to fifteen years (Lightman & Gingrich, 2012; Galarneau & Morissette, 2008). Strength-based or asset-based support or intervention is a key to sustainable integration. It enables immigrants to discover where their strengths lie, and encourages them to build on their attributes and assets in order to make positive and lasting changes in their lives (Murray & Ferguson, 2002; Sahay & Glover, 2005; Wong, 2007; Braga, 2007; Galarneau & Morissette, 2008; Somerville & Walsworth, 2009; Jimeno, Kilito & Urquhart, 2010; Nakhaie & Kazemipur, 2013; Lightman & Gingrich, 2012; Reitz, Curtis & Elrick, 2013; CLIP, 2013; Raza, Beaujot & Woldemicael, 2013; Bailey, 2014; Picot, Lou & Qiu, 2014). In this study, Aspen Family and Community Network researchers explored a sustainable intervention model that could support the successful integration of recent immigrants in Canada.

Aspen has used its strength-based philosophy in the development of an asset-web model that explores key settlement and integration asset areas (Figure 2). Recognizing that immigrants struggle with different issues and contexts than their Canadian-born peers, Aspen researchers modified the SL framework to consist of interrelated asset areas that are significant to immigrant settlement. The Immigrant Integration Asset-web (IIAW) model is a construct that illustrates the inter-relatedness of different asset areas that are critical in integration processes. The six asset areas of integration include education and career, family income, home and family, community networks, health and security, and systems/institutional access.

Methodology

This study explores the experiences of three immigrant participants: Robert, Moraya, and Dayana and is a segment of Aspen's larger research project "Sustainable Livelihood: A Practice Intervention of Cohorts in Life Transitions." Using a case study method, the study hopes to answer the question: What would best inform a service delivery practice when providing support to vulnerable immigrants? The investigators' knowledge of the participant's circumstances placed them in the position to apply the notion of "soak and poke", a method in social science research popularized by Richard Fenno. The 'soaking and poking' method involves researchers being closely engaged with the participants in field observations and face-to-face conversations (Alama et al., 2018). The IIAW model evolved from a series of meetings and conversations with researchers and participants of the study. Researchers reviewed the data and reflected on their experience, insights and what they had learned about the participants. The social laboratory setting provided a reflective exercise of prototype solutions (Hassan, 2014) that led to the development of the IIAW framework.

Participants of the study

Robert was a skilled immigrant in his 50s. He worked as a senior manager in an international engineering company in Pakistan. Although he had a well-to-do life in Pakistan, he decided to move to Canada with hopes for better career opportunities, a safer and more secure environment, better education for his children, and a brighter future for his family. Like many recent immigrants, after he arrived in Canada, he worked in 'survival' jobs not commensurate to his qualifications. He later found a job closer to his professional training and experience; however,

when the economic downturn hit the company in 2014, Robert was laid off and had not been able to find a job since.

Robert would regularly visit to one of Aspen's family centre in his search for a job and resources and to make use of their freely available computer and internet. Upon first arriving in Canada in 2012, Robert secured employment in a field related to his expertise within one month. However, when the research team first met Robert he had been recently laid off due to the economic downturn. In search of employment, Robert frequented several different social service organizations throughout the city, some immigrant-specific and some not, tapping into any available resources that could aid him in his search for work.

Of all the research participants, Robert had the least amount of difficulty navigating social service systems or institutions. He was quite comfortable with and proficient at accessing resources. One of his main difficulties was that many of the service systems are not well developed to help highly skilled immigrants with specific employment needs. A related issue for Robert was the detrimental impact of long-term unemployment on his emotional health, which continued throughout the length of the research. Issues of self-value and decreasing motivation were integrally linked with the perceived devaluation of his skills and experience in the job market. In addition, Robert's family, who had remained in Pakistan after he immigrated, arrived in Canada shortly after he lost his job. It is not uncommon for skilled immigrants to experience a drop in standard of living during the immigration process. For Robert, coming from a privileged position in Pakistan, unemployment only heightened this loss for his family.

The research team asked Robert to number each of the individual points in the six asset areas of IIAW (Figure 2), where 10 is the highest level of strength. Under "Community Network" Robert marked 'family support' at a 6 (up 4 points from the previous session), and 'faith-based support' at a 7 (up 2 points). Although Robert was feeling his community networks were stronger, his mental and emotional health was suffering (dropping 2 points to a 4). Tied to his continuing unemployment, he also felt his family was shouldering the burden of his being out of work (indicating that their safety and security dropped 2 points to a 5).

The other participants were a mother and daughter duo, Moraya and Dayana. Both were clients of Aspen's Sustainable Families program (a program addressing housing instability). They were invited as participants in the SL case study with immigrants. They originally came from Afghanistan. Their family had been displaced twice to two war-torn countries in Asia before they immigrated to Canada as refugees. During their displacement, Moraya and her children faced extreme war-related hardships which were compounded by domestic abuse. After immigrating to Canada and continuing to endure abuse, Moraya made the difficult decision to leave her husband, which ostracized her from her ethno-cultural community. Dayana chose to go with her mother. Moraya was unable to work due to chronic pain from years of abuse and mobility issues, and she did not have the opportunity to pursue English lessons. While Moraya could understand a moderate amount of English, she was still limited in her ability to speak it. Dayana, in her late teens, had her high school education disrupted by the difficulties of her home life and was not able to graduate as a result.

Moraya and her family came to Canada over 10 years ago but have remained unsettled and continue to face isolation, loneliness, and poverty. With limited income and social support, the greatest difficulties for Moraya and Dayana revolved around health issues, both physical and emotional, and access to resources and social support systems. Figure 1 is a simplified form of the IIAW used to identify the asset areas of these two participants (although both have eventually adopted Figure 2 as the research progressed).

Figure 1: A modified version of IIAW with the participants Moraya and Dayana
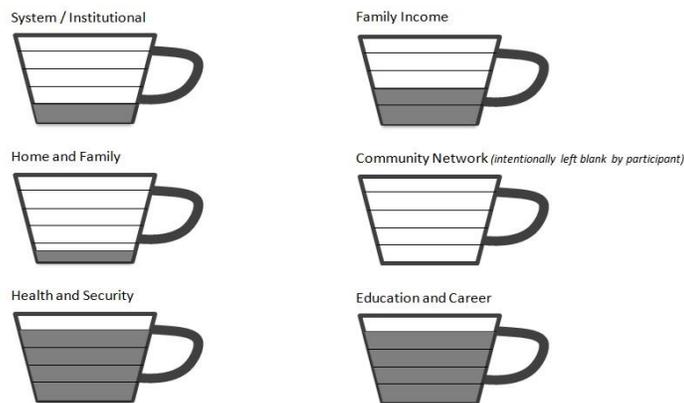

Given Moraya's limitations in English, the team opted for a simpler method of measurement and used tea cups to represent each of the six asset areas of the IIAW. At each visit both mother and daughter would indicate their perceived level of strength in each area; the fuller the cup, the better off they felt they were in that asset area. The example in Figure 1 indicates that while Dayana considered her educational assets as strong (being on track with her high school upgrade courses), she also felt that community networks were non-existent (intentionally leaving that area blank) and that her family supports were extremely limited. Since Moraya separated from her husband and Dayana chose to go with her, the two had been estranged from their other family members.

The Immigrant Integration Asset-web (IIAW)

The case study topics of conversation revolved around the six main areas of the IIAW model. To address the "Home and Family" asset area, participants were asked questions such as, "What does home mean?" and "Does Canada feel like home?" At each meeting, participants were asked to measure their asset areas at that given moment. The first hand insights from unskilled immigrant families (Moraya and Dayana) and skilled immigrants (Robert) allowed the researchers to be reflexive about the current state of Aspen's service practices. While recognizing that the economic downturn in Canada has resulted in increased unemployment and decreased income opportunities, the team contended that using an asset and strength-based approach in supporting newcomers and recent immigrants is one of the key practices leading to sustainable settlement.

Figure 2: Immigrant Integration Asset Web model (IIAW model)
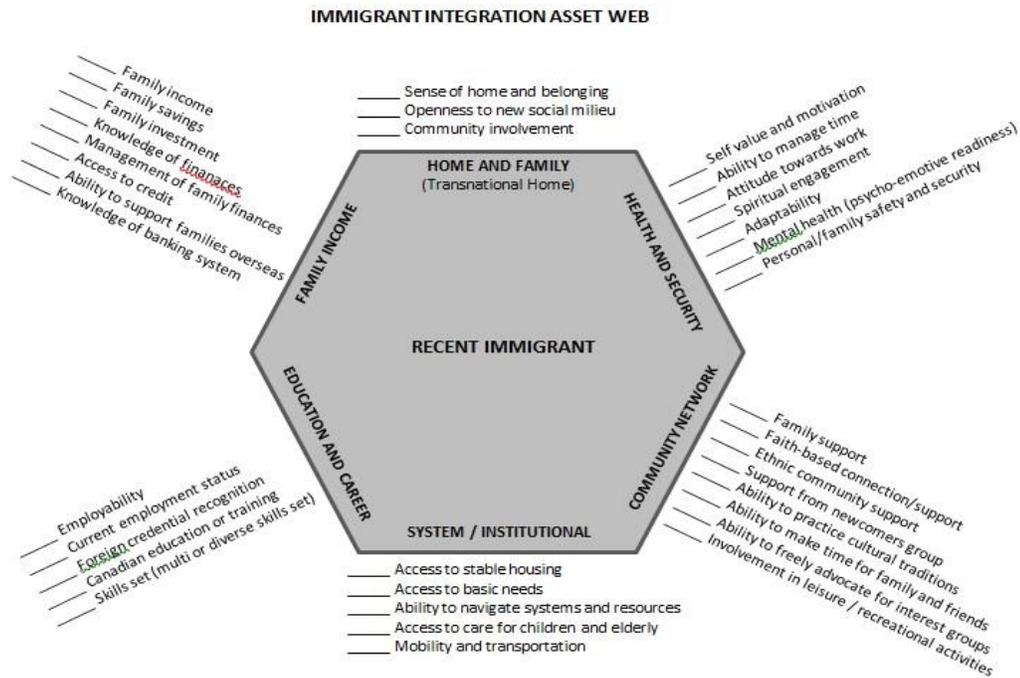
One of the key asset areas of integration is "Home and Family." Immigrants enrich the diversity and cultural landscape in Canada. One of the greatest challenges facing immigrants, however, is the development of a sense of belonging in Canada and, possibly, the acceptance of different value systems. Developing a new sense of home is complicated by the emotional and physical ties that individuals maintain with their communities of origin. Thus, in this project, the research team considered the fostering of a new sense of 'transnational' home, a sense of home that includes both Canada and the country of origin (Alama, 2009), as a key area of strength for new immigrants.

"Family Income" in the IIAW model, similar to the "financial assets" of the SL framework, concerns issues of monetary assets, including knowledge of and control over one's finances. Importantly, for this immigrant integration model, the research team added remittances to families overseas, a potential financial constraint unique to immigrants, and knowledge of the banking system, which is unfamiliar to newcomers. Family income is linked to education attainment and career prospects. A previous study by Berger and Parkin (2009) indicates that degree and diploma-holders in Canada are now financially better off relative to non-graduates, compared to 25 years ago; and that Canadian workers without a high school diploma are two and a half times more likely to be unemployed than those with a bachelor's degree.

The "Education and Career" segment in the IIAW model closely mirrors the "human assets" segment of the SL framework in its consideration of factors that affect one's employability. However, immigrants face barriers and constraints that their non-immigrant peers do not, such as

the non-recognition of foreign education and work experience. For immigrants, the development of a skill set may entail acquiring different skills such as language and 'soft' skills.

Aspen's IIAW model also includes "System and Access." Under Sustainable Livelihoods, housing, food, clothing and access to services such as transportation, elder/child care and recreation all fall within the area of "physical assets." However, the asset-web model goes beyond what is considered to be "physical assets" (as evidenced by our work with the case participants and Aspen's work with clients in general). For the participants, successful integration entails acquiring the knowledge and ability to meet basic needs and navigate support from unfamiliar settlement systems and institutions in Canada.

The "Health and Security" segment is similar to the "personal assets" of the SL framework in gauging self-value, self-esteem, and motivation, however, it also includes unique things such as an immigrant's adaptability to his or her new context. Both health and security, in particular, are significant indicators for immigrant well-being.

The "Community Network" asset area in the IIAW mirrors closely the "social assets" of the SL framework, which measures the degree of support individuals receive or can access through family, friends, and community members. The IIAW model extends the list of supports to include newcomers' and ethno-cultural groups as well as faith-based communities, which may play a significant role in providing social supports to newly arrived immigrants.

The development of IIAW evolved from the series of collective observations, conversations, and planning with the participants of the study. The concept of social laboratory (Hassan, 2014), provided a framework of the development of a prototype: that is, researchers developed an IIAW prototype and continually dissected the model using the input of the participants on areas of settlement that would make sense to them. Results indicate that the process of self-identification of attributes using the model sparked several 'aha' moments or hopes to overcome their respective challenges. The process also increased participants' self-esteem and allowed a more realistic and holistic goals.

A protracted integration

Integration is a long drawn-out process and does not necessarily happen within an expected timeframe. It involves the intersection of multiple, individual-specific factors. In research, immigrants are typically grouped according to their length of stay in Canada. For example, those who have been in Canada less than five years are often termed very recent immigrants, those in Canada for five to 10 years as recent immigrants, and those who have lived in Canada over 10 years are considered to be established immigrants (Gilmore & Le Petit, 2008). However, settlement and integration timelines are variable and depend on contexts, opportunities, and a community's ability to provide services and support, and individual demographic factors such as race, age, and gender. Processes of settlement and integration relate to family income (Statistics Canada, 2005; Bernard, 2012), employment and training (Ezumi et al, 2010; Bucklaschuk & Wilkinson, 2011), mental health (Kosny, 2013), social connections, civic participation (Wong &

Tezli, 2013), and a sense of belonging (Alama, 2009). The experience of Robert, Moraya and Dayana reflected the same challenges and struggles.

New and recent immigrants' challenges are compounded by basic needs and health issues. Dayana shared some of the complex challenges she and her mother, Moraya, were facing:

> Once we got to the income support they gave us a motel that night she (Moraya) started to feel sick, so I took her to the hospital. At the hospital they asked us "Do you guys have a home, what is going on?" We said "we haven't had any real food; we don't have a shelter; we don't have a home" They gave us a few contact numbers of people who could help us but none of them picked up their phones. I was going to school at that time and my counselor gave me this card that says "the SORCe" which is in downtown... At the interview, we told the SORCe how we got kicked out and how we couldn't pay the rent and how we didn't have food for a few days. We stayed at the motel room for one more day and then a social worker told us they found a place for us through a housing institution... For some odd reason, that institution was really bad... That was the worst day in my life in Canada I can remember.

Unskilled immigrants – immigrants with little knowledge of English in particular – face challenges in understanding the roles of support services and their workers. Language barriers

make it particularly hard for them to identify the resources they need, and to also understand that the role of support workers is primarily to support them in their endeavors, not to do things for them. When Moraya and Dayana first came to Canada the English language was a barrier to their ability to navigate support systems and groups. They had prevalent struggles with systems navigation and demeaning experiences with some service institutions. Dayana described the experience of being in a shelter with her mother Moraya as "worse than prison" and "hell on earth." She got to the point where she thought "Just let me die. I don't want to be alive" She explained why she did not reach out for help and ultimately attempted suicide:

> [The worker] was like, "you should have told me." And I am like,
> "why should I tell you that these people are not treating us well?"
> Nobody is gonna believe us even if we tell you. You are just gonna
> think we are making excuses.

Socio-economic challenges, such as difficulties finding quality housing, can derail the process of integration. Compared to Canadian-born renters, recent immigrants were found to be twice as likely to experience housing affordability issues (Noble & Selinger, 2012) and more likely to spend 30-50% of their income on housing thus placing them at high risk of homelessness (Tanasescu et al., 2009). Lack of affordable housing jeopardizes integration prospects due to its negative effects on family finances, mental health, and the health and well-being of children (Wachsmuth, 2008). Socio-economic issues like low-income, low-education level and experiences of discrimination have been related to a higher likelihood of mental health issues in both adults and children (Ferguson, Bovaird & Mueller, 2007, p. 701).

Researchers have observed what is called the "healthy immigrant effect," a phenomenon in which immigrants tend to be healthier than their Canadian-born counterparts upon first arriving in Canada (Ng, Wilkins, Gendron, & Berthelot, 2005; Ng, 2011). Moreover, the initial mental health advantage of "healthy immigrants" could be lost as their time since landing increased (De Maio, 2010). A study by the Immigrant Sector Council of Calgary (2015) suggests likewise that the widely documented 'deskilling' of immigrants may contribute to the rapid decline in health status after arrival.

For Moraya and Dayana, development toward sustainability over the course of the project did not entail what may be seen as huge leaps. In their own self-assessments using the asset tea cups, there appeared to be minimal improvement. However, given the complexity of their 'vulnerable' condition, what could be perceived as minimal improvements were considered to be significant changes, particularly in the areas of Home & Family, Family Income, and Systems/Institutional on the asset-web model.

As mentioned earlier, Moraya and Dayana had been ostracized from their family as a result of their decision to leave the husband and father. As the rift in the family had not been healed, at the meetings, both women indicated a very low score (generally one out of five) for the "Home & Family" asset area. At one meeting, Dayana explained that this low score in the IIAW reflected their strained relationship with other family members rather than the physical home where they resided. Furthermore, when they were living in a shelter Dayana and Moraya had been given no control over their most basic needs, including when to take medication. Dayana's attempted suicide directly relates the oppressive regulatory conditions of the shelter. This 'infantilization'

of shelter residents illustrates what we understand as "systemic vulnerabilities." Once they began working with Aspen, Moraya and Dayana were able to stabilize their housing situation and were finally given some control over their lives. Since then, the mother and daughter's scores in asset areas of home and family as well as access to basic needs have increased. Dayana expressed her understanding, and joy, that in the decision of where to live, Dayana and her mother had the final say:

> Team Member: How did you find this area [to live in]?

> Dayana: Perry [Aspen's Housing Strategist] helped us. He called me and then I got a call and they found a place and one of the places didn't work out and this place Denise [our Family Strategist] said we could come and see it and we said this is perfect because everything here is close to us.

> Team Member: Did you guys have a choice in the place?

> Dayana: We knew we had a choice because Perry asked us many times: "Is this ok for you?" He could have found us another place; he did not say "you have to take this place." He said "if you like this place it's yours if you don't like it we can look for another place." We said no this is perfect because this is close to my school close to her family doctor.

In terms of "Family Income," the participants remained dependent on social assistance for the duration of the project. Earlier on in the process, after expressing a love of cooking, the research team attempted to get Moraya connected to the Centre for Newcomers' EthniCity Catering, a catering business which provides employment opportunities to immigrants. Unfortunately, frequent health issues and chronic pain (resulting from years of domestic abuse) prevented her from pursuing this opportunity. Dayana focused her efforts on attaining her high school diploma and thus employment was not an option for her at that time.

While there may have seemed to be little progress in terms of traditional markers (such as increased income), progress was marked in moving from suicide as a solution to difficulties toward actively pursuing solutions. When the research team first met Moraya and Dayana, they felt such despair that taking their own lives seemed like the only solution. In fact, both had made previous attempts at suicide. By the end of the research project, however, mother and daughter had learned enough soft skills from Aspen staff (i.e., how to negotiate with a landlord) and had gained enough confidence to advocate for themselves in times of difficulty. Toward the end of the project Dayana had tried to procure new housing for her, her mother and her sister, who at that point was estranged from her husband and living with them. Unfortunately, after placing a $1,800 deposit on a rental home, Dayana felt as though she had been scammed and was initially unable to get her money back. On her own, without help from their family strategist, Dayana fought for her rights and eventually got her money back.

Security takes on significant meaning for immigrants moving to Canada from less secure regions of the world. Each of the immigrant participants expressed an appreciation for the sense of personal safety and security they have in Canada. Those coming from war-affected areas noted how difficult it is to move beyond the heightened sense of fear and insecurity they lived under prior to immigration. The hauntings of past trauma results in insecurities that affect sense belonging in a new country. Dayana explained how difficult it was for her to open up and begin to trust others. She explained how her mother is still frightened by loud noises:

> Before… I didn't trust strangers and [I thought] that's not a good idea for some reason. But when I found that there's nobody to go to, I started trusting [my high school counsellor] because I felt like… it might not harm me… [T]hat kind of made me go forward.

> Usually when I am not at home, [my mother] would get scared a lot. She is easily scared because there was so much violence in the past and the side effects are there.

During the course of the project the research meetings created opportunities for participants to share about things beyond subsistence. The research team supported and encouraged mother and daughter to pursue physical and social activities, friendships, and educational opportunities. Dayana, speaking about Moraya, shared the importance of feeling a sense of belonging:

"…even if she doesn't get a job, she would – she would like to work free, but she wants to feel like she's wanted. She wants to feel like she's a part of something."

Evidenced by the case narratives and previous study on integration and settlement of new immigrants, this study concludes that time, processes, and service interventions can influence the trajectories of integration. A more holistic and asset-based framework is an effective and a more sustainable approach that eases up the protracted and complex process of integration.

Expectations of employment and a better future

Wrapped up in the immigration process are multiple expectations from both the immigrants themselves and the receiving country. Most immigrants expect to find a better life and home than the previous 'environments they fled' (Frideres, 1999; Alama, 2009), or at the very least, to not experience a decline in standard of living. Canada also expects immigrants to become contributing members of society. Moraya shared some of her hopes and expectations of moving to Canada:

During the war in Afghanistan, I lost my uncle and my five-year old. I took my children away from Afghanistan and crossed the mountains to get to Pakistan. It was very dangerous escape. When we got to Pakistan we had nothing. We were refugees. We went to Tajikistan after a few years. Tajikistan had no jobs and the

houses were in bad shape. They were "left over" old Russian buildings. I remember my daughter passed out because we didn't have food. The water was not really unsanitary. There was a lot of mud, dirt in it...When the United Nations helped us to immigrate to Canada, we were so happy. Finally we can have peace and better life.

Robert also expressed his expectations for a better life in Canada:

I did my Engineering in Mechanical 25 years ago. My job experience was quite diverse, ranging from operations to business management. I worked for about 10 years for a Dutch company… I was the business group manager in that company representing my country. We were part of Asia Pacific and our head office was in Singapore at the time. In 2007 I got the Visa for moving to Canada, but it was challenging. The opportunities were not that much in Pakistan so I decided to take a chance to go back to Canada in 2012. My primary motive for – for taking such a decision was for my children and their career – education, employment and safety. So I took a decision to move to Canada, I thought maybe they are in the middle of their career – education career – they'll have better opportunities to learn and grow here.

Studies (Yssaad, 2012; Bernard, 2012) indicate that immigrants are disproportionately more likely to experience unemployment. Denying immigrants job opportunities that would allow them to become 'good Canadians' (Dyck & McLaren, 2004), can be costly and detrimental for Canada and immigrants. Many have little option but to accept survival employment or "jobs well below their qualifications – and their dignity – in order to ensure basic economic survival." (Creese & Wiebe, 2012, p.61). Despite Robert's higher education and his managerial employment with international companies overseas, he settled for 'survival jobs' for sustenance. Monte Solberg, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) Minister at the time, recognized that "newcomers have trouble finding work that allows them to fully use their skills and experience, and that their unemployment and underemployment represent more than just a drag on Canada's productivity" (Solberg, 2006, par. 13).

Robert shared his efforts to obtain secure and adequate employment that would enable him to gain financial stability:

> I decided to make a slight shift in my career. I started my job as a
> project management team member there, so in the initial period I
> had to acquire new skills and new competence sets to start that job
> because I haven't been the project manager previously in my back
> home job. First I worked in a small engineering company as a
> Scheduler about 11 months. Then I moved to another engineering
> company providing infrastructure, transit and power generation

projects. I worked there for about two years and then I was laid off
in January in 2015 and have not found a job since then.

My approach right now is: I am not confining myself to only one
geographical location. I am trying to explore other opportunities
and career choices. I have some interests and experiences in
supply chain management. I have an engineering background,
exposure to business, and project management experience. These
are the possible areas in which I am trying to find some
opportunities. I am flexible to move around, out of Calgary or
even out of Alberta, depending on the conditions.

Many skilled workers return to their home countries or to work in other countries after being
continually frustrated with the labour market and bureaucratic obstacles in Canada. For Robert,
however, there is no turning back. The hope for a better future of his family gave him sense of
purpose. He demonstrated resilience and persistence in his intention to become successful in
Canada and plot it out in IIAW as an asset:

Like as I mentioned earlier, there are different challenges. Once
you came to Canada you have to pass through those phases. So, I
very patiently spent my three years' time with my family here and
just struggling and striving to be successful. So that shows my…
rather than quitting and going back home or taking radical

decisions, you know, I stayed here and to never give up. So that

shows my persistence and sustainable thinking.

The IIAW exercise also sparked Moraya with a hope to get a job. Language, physical and mobility challenges were her primary challenges. To overcome these barriers, she enrolled in ESL classes and successfully accessed support for sustained medical prescriptions. She and Dayana hoped to pass the driving test and own a second-hand car to access resources and opportunities:

So once we have transportation we will be able to go to places like

the park, recreation centres, groceries, and support places. We

wouldn't say, "oh that's too far away" or we would not be get

frustrated on why we couldn't go to a place. Once we get the

transportation, we will be happy. We will be happy because if we

were sitting at home then nothing is going to make us happy.

Statistics Canada's 2005 Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants identifies the various difficulties faced by new immigrants in their first four years after arrival. Most frequently reported challenges in relation to finding an adequate job include: "learning a new language, getting used to the weather, lack of support from their homeland, adapting to a new culture and values, financial constraints, lack of recognition of credentials or expertise, lack of social interaction, difficulties accessing professional help, discrimination or racism, finding quality housing, accessing education/training, and accessing childcare" (Statistics Canada, 2005, p.1). In addition,

systemic barriers to integration that impact employment outcomes include lack of recognition of foreign credentials and experience, unfair practices around professional licensing, and discriminatory hiring practice (Basran & Zong 1998; Boyd & Schellenberg, 2007; Li, 2001; Ngo & Este, 2006; Wayland, 2006).

A call for holistic service provision

Citizenship and Immigration Canada defines integration as a two-way process that encourages adjustments from both newcomers and the receiving society; the interaction between the two determines the outcomes of settlement, adaptation, and integration (CIC, 2011, par. 1). While there are merits to this definition, integration on the part of immigrants does not merely require their adjustments in the receiving country. It more specifically requires coherent, integral, and sustainable approaches that support the immigrant in addressing the complex, multi-layered, and unique aspects of their lives. Integration involves support structures and systems that will empower recent immigrants to meet expectations – their own and Canada's – as they transition and eventually become fully settled and integrated into their communities. Social integration allows immigrants to develop a shared sense of citizenship, attachment and belonging (Blake, 2013). The experience of the participants of this study indicates that there is a need for more integrated processes of support services that could hasten the settlement and integration of new immigrants.

Moraya and Dayana, despite being in Canada for ten years, have not fully adjusted to the culture and system of the country. Their experiences of social isolation and poverty have become deterrents to transition to full settlement and integration. They said:

> I'm at home most of the time. I have limited English, cannot drive, and have problem with my health. And about driving, I may not even get the chance because I cannot read or can barely understand English. And even if there is a Farsi translation of the test, it would not work. I do not read Farsi. I also want to work but no one will hire me. I'm not sure what my future will be in Canada. Although my children are grown up, I am not sure about their future either. I am worried. (Moraya)

> I was very disappointed at school. I got bullied because I am quiet most of the time – although, I still want to be successful. There were times when I wanted to end my life. But I cannot leave my mom. I still hope to complete my high school and get a job so I can support her. Maybe I should start volunteering or work on losing my weight. Like my mom, want to drive so I can get a job and bring my mom around. (Dayana)

Challenges related to mobility and accessibility and the ability to navigate resources and support systems can be stressful for vulnerable immigrants. One of the best practices of sustainable

development is the use of a holistic or a wrap-around continuum of empowering support or intervention beyond basic needs provision. Such an approach becomes sustainable when it is grounded in the strengths, assets, or capacities of people. Moraya and Dayana eventually acknowledged their assets and capacities and used them to overcome their respective vulnerabilities.

Moreover, in working with Robert over the course of the project, the limitations of traditional social services in helping skilled immigrants became apparent. Among the six asset areas, 'education and career' were continually at the forefront of his self-identified needs. Prior to the economic downturn and being laid off, Robert had demonstrated resilience and adaptability in exploring new career options in Canada:

> When I moved here… I decided to make a slight shift in my career. I started my job as a project management team member there, so in the initial period I had to acquire new skills and new competence sets to start that job because I haven't been the project manager previously in my back home job. So I learned those areas. That was pretty smooth, you know, I didn't find it difficult and fortunately my teammates were also very supportive in the organization…Whatever I have done here, work here, is completely new for me. I acquired those skills once I came here so it was just like a fresh career for me, without any reflection on my expertise or my experience back home.

Since being laid off, Robert continued to demonstrate persistence and a strong determination to improve his situation. He visited different agencies daily to take advantage of available resources and volunteered at various organizations to develop his social network and access new opportunities. He explained that his continued efforts were also an attempt to maintain a positive attitude:

> I have been trying to keep myself busy rather than being frustrated, disappointed, you know?
>
> It's hard; it's not that simple. Personally, I have learned from those adverse conditions, the best thing I can do is to keep my hopes high, you know. That's the only thing I can do because… I know every day I have to encounter challenges in day-to-day affairs… The most important thing is for me to keep myself composed and then face the situation with courage, with hope. If I lose hope then I lose everything, you know… I am not expecting that kind of motivation from the external environment. I have to drive that energy and motivation from myself. It's a challenging phase and, I hope, this phase will be ending sooner or later, and it's a test of my resilience and how much tolerance I have… So the best thing is, I have to keep my mind open and be positive, otherwise it will be, uh, it will be very damaging for me and that can lead to devastation

for my family. So I have to take care of my family, myself, nobody

else.

According to Wayland (2006), the difficulties of the settlement process for immigrants must be recognized as a Canadian problem rather than an immigrant problem. There are systemic barriers to integration that impact employment outcomes that are necessarily attributable to immigrants' inability to integrate. These barriers include lack of recognition of foreign credentials and experience, unfair practices around professional licensing, and discriminatory hiring practices, among others (Basran & Zong 1998; Boyd & Schellenberg, 2007; Li, 2001; Ngo & Este, 2006; Wayland, 2006; Saunders 2005 as cited in Lightman & Gingrich, 2012, pp. 125- 126; Galarneau & Morissette, 2008; Gilmore & Le Petit, 2008).

Furthermore, the employment trajectories of skilled immigrants are rarely straightforward. Fuller & Martin (2012), in examining data from the last wave of the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (n= 5,859), explore the effects of human capital variables (skills, knowledge or experience) on the employment trajectories of immigrants during their first four years of settlement in Canada. They hypothesized that immigrants with higher levels of education would more quickly integrate than their less-educated peers; however, results of the study indicate that higher education does not consistently ensure faster integration or greater proficiency in Canada's official languages; and that it also does not reduce the risk of redirection, partial integration or, among women and less-educated men, delayed labor market entry. These findings were consistent with Picot, Hou and Qiu who argue that "the significant earnings advantages that

university-educated immigrants had over their less educated counterparts in the 1980s had virtually disappeared by the 2000s" (2014, p.6).

Despite Robert's efforts to maintain a positive attitude, it was difficult for him to keep the detrimental psychological effects of long-term unemployment at bay:

> "Because like, if you do not have a daily routine or activities, you know, then it [unemployment] becomes challenging even for an extended period. For a couple of weeks or months, it's fine, but if you are not doing anything formal for like three-four months then... There is a tendency to, what you call, procrastination, you know -- being slow, delaying things, not actively pursuing things. So like you become docile sort of things, you know? Like you don't have to wake up seven o'clock in the morning and there is, there is no motivation… there are no time bounds schedule for you… So as human, you know, you became more and more lethargic, you know, relaxed, complacent. That's also damaging, you know? Like your fitness, your effort levels – if you draw a graph then it goes down… so that's a challenge I been facing.

In addition to the difficulty of keeping up his own spirits, Robert placed on himself the added stress of being the sole source of strength for his family. He explained the burden he felt from

not being able to provide the same standard of living for his children that they enjoyed in Pakistan.

> I think I have to play a leading role, you know … because they are they are in the transition. They are also passing through an emotional set back, you know. … They don't have all kinds of luxuries and facilities because back home there was a difference. So they have to adapt to difficult conditions now, [and] they have at the back of their mind [that] I don't have a job, you know. So they are not that much demanding, like umm, they don't send me we need this this this. I have to feel it and then get that things for them, which is something, you know, I feel like they should be more happy and then they should be more open to say like we have to go there, we have to get there, in terms of choices food in terms of visiting places, in terms of going for leisure activities. They are not complaining and they are not asking me, which I feel like that's not natural you know.

For Robert, his most pressing self-identified need was employment, however, it became apparent that he also could have benefited from emotional support groups with other immigrant fathers facing the same challenges and difficulties. Given his high level of education and professional work experience, he needed more than the traditional resource navigation. He was well equipped to navigate systems; unfortunately, his experience suggests that social service agencies and

immigrant serving agencies alike are not providing the support he needed. While Robert, at times, articulated that he must rely on himself to maintain hope, at other times he wished that service providers could provide motivational support. In discussing his interactions with an immigrant serving agency, he expressed:

> I think they are very nice people, but my feeling is maybe they… have not been trained or properly educated how to handle that kind of severe situation, you know. Because, I personally believe whatever they were saying is not relevant to everybody: 'There's no job. No one's hiring. The condition is not good. The job market is depressed'. That is not a secret. Everybody knows that… You have to be positive, you know. You have to give hope to the people talking to you rather than portraying a bleak image of the situation. Everybody's passing through the same situation and they know what's going on. So, you have to spark some motivation in the people who are coming to you because they seek some, some help. When you go to such agencies, they have been trained and they are supposed to offer something beyond those, you know, stereotype statements… One of the guys, he was an employment counselor. So, I had a short discussion with him for about fifteen minutes and in fifteen minutes he said ten times at least that there are no jobs available. So, I was like, I know it and you know it, so look, talk about something else, you know, like alternatives and options and

opportunities available. There are no jobs, but there are options

available. For example, you can start your own business; you can

do some entrepreneurship… There are still some options available."

Some studies note a gap in services, as recent immigrants continue to be over-represented in low-skilled occupations (Galarneau & Morissette, 2008) and are three times more likely to live in poverty (Picot, et al., 2009). Unlike the earlier assumption that recent immigrants settle within five years, studies suggest that longer immigrant transitions to higher earnings often extend up to 10 or 15 years (Lightman & Gingrich, 2012; Galarneau & Morissette, 2008). This study suggests that government and non-government service agencies need to consider alternative means of addressing the unique needs of immigrants regardless of skills level that open up employment and settlement opportunities. The need for more intentional services to support successful integration is obvious in many ways. For instance, transitions to higher earnings and the likelihood of securing a job matching their qualifications remain challenging for most immigrants. Most immigration and settlement programs focus on addressing the immediate needs of very recent immigrants (i.e., those in Canada for five years or less), although Canada reported a persistent proportion of immigrants experiencing unmet needs after four years in Canada (CIC, 2011). The needs being supported included financial help, information and advice, parenting, counseling services, and providing avenues where immigrants can use their talents, knowledge and skills in ways that generate income or self-fulfillment.

Summary

The findings of this study suggest that more coherent, integrated, and comprehensive support is necessary to hasten the settlement and integration processes. Previous studies have already indicated the need to explore a variety of avenues within immigrant communities that facilitate successful integration (Alama, 2009; Bernhard, et al., 2010). Programs need to more effectively bridge the skills of recent immigrants and the Canadian labour market, particularly given the absence of foreign credential recognition, lack of Canadian work experience and language barriers (Walsworth, 2009; Fuller & Martin, 2012; Frank, 2013; Reitz et al., 2013). Moreover, peer-to-peer support, networking, job search assistance, skills development and training, documentation of sector-based skills, and employer engagement through reskilling programs operating as collaborations between educational institutions and industries are likewise important support interventions (Wong, 2007, p.31).

Unemployment and the downward occupational mobility of underemployment not only impact individuals and families economically, but also have detrimental effects on social integration and overall mental and emotional well-being (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Chen, Smith, & Mustard, 2010; Este & Tachble, 2009; Fuller, 2014; Jibeen & Khalid, 2010). Robert was a highly educated and trained immigrant with untapped and wasted skills during a prolonged period of unemployment. The skills of Moraya in art and appraising antiques and jewelry as well as Dayana's strong potentials to become a successful young Canadian, would all mean nothing unless opportunities are created. On a positive note, however, the participants had the opportunity to connect with friends, faith-based groups and community-based service providers. Interventions in employment

and in finding opportunities in the initial period of settlement can have significant impacts on individuals, as the pathways immigrants take through the labor market in their first four years shape wages and occupational attainment later on. It is not just who immigrants are when they enter a new country that matters, but also how their experiences unfold after they arrive (Fuller, 2014, p. 4).

Immigrant integration in Canada can become quite lengthy because of extrinsic barriers, however, integration can be supported by incorporating and building human and social assets, resilience, and community engagement (Elez, 2014). Aspen proposes that a strength-based philosophy and asset-based approaches, such as the SL framework, are efficacious and sustainable in supporting vulnerable recent immigrant families as they integrate into their communities and Canadian society in general.

A strength-based approach that recognizes the value of the experiences, education or skills that immigrants bring to Canada is one of the starting points to integration (Sahay and Glover, 2005). It helps immigrants map out their assets or capacities and enables them to self-identify attributes, upon which they can build foundations of integration and lasting contributions to Canadian society. Such an approach allows participants to set reasonable and achievable goals based on their own strengths and asset areas. This study proposes the use of IIAW framework, an example of an asset-based framework (as illustrated in Figure 2) to map out contexts and assets of immigrants working toward full integration and settlement in Canadian society. Aspen's IIAW model is further discussed in another article (Alama, 2018).

Aspen affirms that successful integration entails the economic ability to maintain sustainability, increased social and cultural connections, and active civic participation. A prolonged period of settlement and integration is inevitable unless an asset-based and comprehensive approach, supported by sound immigration policies, is designed to mitigate or reduce the vulnerabilities of immigrants. The study concludes that an asset-based support for recent immigrants within the first five years is a critical intervention.

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