

Collaboration and Advocacy During COVID- 19: Facilitating the Digital Transformation in Ontario Agencies

Session: Going Hybrid: Lessons from Quebec
and Ontario Immigrant Serving Agencies
During the Pandemic

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Introduction

- Based in part on the final chapter of BMRC edited volume (Valerie, Tara and a variety of community-based co-authors)
- The Focus here is on the place of collaboration and advocacy in its various dimensions and how this connects to resilience and the future of immigrant settlement and integration.
- The overall point to be made is about the central importance of enhanced collaboration and advocacy in the settlement sector.
- If we are to ‘build back better’ post-pandemic, then the collaborative and advocacy roles of settlement sector organizations need to continue to be active and in fact enhanced. The sector’s capacity in these areas need to be greatly strengthened.

Collaboration Over Competition

- During the pandemic there was an emphasis on meeting the crisis through collaboration and partnerships within and between sectors.
- Collaboration and partnerships were greatly expanded during this time and LIPs (outside of Quebec) played an especially important coordinating role.
- ISAs developed enhanced relationships with bodies such as food banks, health centres, schools, other ISAs, among others.
- The prioritization on collaboration during COVID-19 stood in contrast to funder practices during normal times on competition among agencies.

- Strong link between collaboration and advocacy which is about voice and listening.
- Lesson – collaboration works and should be a driving ethic in the sector over hyper competitiveness. The ‘spirit of sharing’ was evident.
- As one respondent noted:

“I think the nature of collaboration has shifted. For us, we are all about collaboration. Everything we do is done through conversations and ... it’s creating enabling environment for our partners to succeed in their own mandates. [O]ur experience has been that throughout the pandemic, the nature of the collaboration shifted in that it became a lot more intense.”

Advocacy and the Settlement Sector

What is advocacy?

- It is broadly “the act of voicing the concerns and needs of the constituency, conveying their opinion and representing their interests to the state” (Laforest 2001, 8).
- Nonprofit organizations like ISAs have two key roles: service, and advocacy (they in fact go together). Also, as mission-based organizations they are focused on working collaboratively for mutual societal benefit.
- Advocacy is also good service: to properly provide for the needs of clients and communities we need to hear the voices of those served (so we can understand what those needs are and so that communities can articulate their own interests).

Impact of Neoliberalism

- A problem has been the impact of neoliberalism, austerity and New Public Management (NPM) (beginning the late 1980s) has worked to marketize nonprofit work, attempted to make agencies purely service providers under contract, and de-legitimize the advocacy role of nonprofits and diminishing cooperation. (Uneven pattern, perhaps less strong in Quebec with history of strong social movements.)
- Advocacy hasn't disappeared but it has been turned, to borrow a concept from Zygmunt Bauman, into 'liquid advocacy' – where nonprofits must be flexible in how they engage in advocacy with it becoming more “intermittent, hybrid” and masked in its forms, to escape the displeasure of gov't funders (Feldman et al. 2017).
- Contradictory tendencies are set in motion by neoliberalism (problem of 'advocacy chill'). On the one hand, organizations are incentivized to refrain/downplay advocacy, on the other hand, the further marginalizing of populations needing services compels organizations to become more active in advocacy. But this tension results in a fragmented response among nonprofits. Coordinated planning and strategizing among nonprofits becomes difficult.

- Given this history it is not surprising that advocacy remains an issue of some sensitivity and differing approaches to it exist within the sector (some prefer the language of ‘community engagement’ and more eager to speak about cooperation and collaboration).

Types of Advocacy

- First there are different players – ISAs, LIPs and umbrella organizations, like OCASI and TCRI (each often taking different advocacy roles).
- Second, advocacy comes in different forms from ‘hard’ to ‘soft’ (Evans and Shields 2014).
- *Hard advocacy* involves directly lobbying government, engaging in public criticism, and challenging gov’t policy.
- *Soft advocacy* by contrast is about engaging with funders and policymakers but mostly behind the scene – with regular communication and consultation. Informing and educating officials around client issues and concerns. The focus is often on consultation and consensus building (Jedwab 2002, 77).
- This also involves building alliances and understanding within and outside the sector, through discussions and education, finding common foundations for solidarity.

- Advocacy in the nonprofit sector is about relationships and engagement between the state and nonprofits and inevitably this involves “both collaboration and conflict” (Wayland 2006, 1).
- The effectiveness of softer forms of advocacy rests on the willingness of gov’t officials/funders to listen, engage as co-producers in services, and respect the voices (perspectives) of agencies (and often act upon them).
- Of course, neoliberalism engaged with nonprofits but as contracted alternative service delivery agencies (not as true partners with voice). This has been termed *antagonistic collaboration* (Brewis et al. 2021, 117).

The Pandemic and Changing Relationships

- The key development during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada is that the IRCC relationship with ISAs and the broader settlement sector shifted with the move away from NPM approaches to one of truer partnership based on listening, regular communication, respectful relationships, rule relaxation to enhance flexibility, collaboration, and strong gov't support for the sector.
- Quebec had its own dynamic with Government leaving the integration sector largely to its own to manage through the pandemic (but with a stronger ISA resource base and an already established local cross sector collaborative network.)
- This is the context in which soft advocacy is effective at building collaboration and cooperative partnerships where voice is heard and acted upon.
- The pandemic opened a 'policy window' creating space for alternative visions of policy including for immigrant settlement. The hegemony of neoliberal approaches was challenged and the prospect of 'building back better' along more inclusive lines became a possibility. The pandemic is the 'great revealer' and re-shaper of relationships. It was a time of building connections and allies for common cause.

- The concern is that this lesson of the pandemic may not survive the recovery and there will be a return to past practice and more one-sided competitive funding relationships where voice is muted (the policy window may shut).

Resilience and Advocacy

- It is the social justice missions (including the voice-oriented components of this) that drive nonprofit organizations to be innovative and resilient.
- This is primarily not the neoliberal idea of resilience that rests in individualized notions of the ability to ‘resiliently endure’ (Leary 2018, 151) and, for ISAs, to ‘do more with less’ (the ‘everyday resilience of nonprofits’ that prevent them from building capacity for managing crises).

- Resilience is not just a ‘reactive capacity’ but also can be proactive with the possibilities for collective transformation (Macrae 2019, 16). Hence, resilience is not just about “bouncing back” but about the possibilities of “bounding forward” (Golubchikov and DeVeuil 2021).
- This speaks to progressive forms of resilience rooted in *social resilience* (Preston et al. 2022) and *transformative resilience* (Bhyan et al., under review).
- As part of settlement sector advocacy is the need to not just advocate for immigrant communities but to promote ‘self-advocacy’ by clients and ‘cause advocacy’ directed at policy change (Abramovitz 2005, 184) – transformational shifts.

- In this process immigrants and their communities are empowered and enabled with the capacity to amplify their own voices and exercise influence over their own destinies.
- For nonprofit organizations, consequently, their advocacy role is not only to speak on behalf of their clients but to aid in the empowerment of immigrants as citizens with collective voice. This is key to achieving social justice and ‘building back better’.
- As community leaders in the settlement sector have noted, it is not enough to direct advocacy efforts at government bodies, but it must reach further into society:

“We also need to broaden that advocacy towards the private sector as well... they also have a role to play.... with work around equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging, all of these are things that both public and private sector have roles to play in the community. And so our advocacy work needs to be broader and holistic in approach in terms of who we are targeting, and not only to the three orders of government.” (NGO2)

Collaboration, Advocacy and the Future of Hybrid Delivery

- Going forward there is a great danger that the NPM hyper competitive funding model with the settlement sector will once again dominate with a closing down of advocacy voice and the collaborative spirit. Under conditions of hybrid service delivery this will greatly intensify competition between agencies overcoming past geographical barriers. This is a particularly harmful situation for small and medium sized agencies.
- The lessons of the pandemic will not have been learned.

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Thank you

Questions/Comments

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