

CONSTRUCTING A COMMUNITY IN DIVERSITY: The South Asian Experience

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project was an eight-month long research funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. It was conducted in partnership with the Chinese Canadian National Council – Toronto Chapter, Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, Hispanic Development Council, and Multicultural Coalition for Access to Family Services. The Somali Immigrant Women's Association joined the alliance through a United Way funding. Each individual research was to provide information in developing an alternative integrative model for settlement planning. This report is the individual research conducted by CASSA. Throughout the research process, the partners met to provide theoretical and political leadership and to oversee the research process.

For CASSA, the objectives of the research report were:

- to ensure that the specificities of the South Asian community would be included in settlement planning;
- to verify and further explore existing knowledge about the South Asian settlement experience;
- to facilitate CASSA's participation in planning settlement services; and
- to experiment with and learn from collaboration with other ethnoracial organizations

The main questions for his project were:

- How do settlement services meet the diversity of needs in South Asian community?
- How should settlement services look like when we take into account South Asian realities?

The methodology adopted was based upon consultation with the partners in this project and with South Asian community members. Throughout the research process, the research partners supported and consulted each other. CASSA also ensured that community consultation was the foundation of the research.

Stage 1: literature review and a statistical profile of the community were developed;

Stage 2: a group of community resource people were gathered to help CASSA find its research directions and fine-tune its methodology;

Stage 3: 9 focus groups were conducted with Bengalis, Gujaratis, Punjabs, Sri Lankan Tamils and Urdu/Hindi speaking people; and 2 focus groups with service providers.

Stage 4: another roundtable with community resource people was arranged to help CASSA analyze the results; and

Stage 5: findings were presented at a community forum including participants in the research to elicit feedback.

The statistical profile indicates a growing and diversifying community but trends must be understood in the context of South Asians' history in Canada and legislative discrimination against certain immigrant groups. The demographic highlights include the following:

- South Asians make up the second largest visible minority group in Canada representing 2.4% of the population;
- 29% of South Asians are Canadian born;
- 23.7% of South Asians live in Scarborough, the largest concentration in CMA Toronto;
- Punjabis make up the largest population in Canada, Ontario, CMA Toronto but Tamils make up the largest number in the municipality of Toronto.
- 5.27% of South Asians are elderly compared with 10.43% of the total population representing the fragmentation of families and communities across the globe.

Settlement Challenges and Issues of South Asians:

- Employment and language issues are major concerns especially issues around accreditation and access to trades and professions;
- The requirement of "Canadian experience" presents a systemic barrier to obtaining decent employment;
- Lack of community and networking as a result of immigration;
- Other concerns include discrimination, housing, health care and child care issues
- Changes in the family present additional vulnerabilities;
- Settlement is an ongoing process which occurs over generations,
- Settlement is considered as unachievable in this lifetime; immigrants' future is considered to be in the hands of their children but deferred gratification is a problem for immigrants who are skilled and accustomed to a relatively high standard of living prior to immigrating to Canada.

South Asians' issues with existing services include:

- Limitations in existing settlement services arise largely because of treating all immigrants as having similar needs and inferiorizing immigrants from South Asian and Third World countries;
- The new immigrant's experience is compartmentalized in settlement services;
- There is no coordination and planning among services and bureaucracies; the most problematic is the lack of consistency between job creation and training/counselling.

Besides specific settlement issues, enhancing the South Asian community capacity is the main theme of this research as it has direct impact on settlement planning. The research questions and advocates the use of the term "South Asian" to describe this group of incredibly diverse people. The challenges and

potential of the South Asian community in community mobilization and planning are:

- The South Asian community is growing and becoming even more diverse;
- Participants associate mostly with their own sub-ethnic community rather than the larger South Asian community;
- Participants accept the label "South Asian" after they come to Canada;
- Participants do not see themselves as being accepted as "Canadians" even after getting their Citizenship;
- Participants find that there is a gulf between them and the established "South Asian" members;
- Participants maintain transnational community link and remain mobile, often not by choice;
- Participants set their settlement goals beyond their life time to their children's so that they are highly motivated and willing to make sacrifices for their children and families' futures but remain dissatisfied with a drop in their standard of living;
- South Asians are becoming more assertive as a community as a result of having created a political space in which to organize.

Three stages of settlement support have been suggested by participants:

- Pre-settlement support: Better preparation of new immigrants entering in Canada either through information dissemination or accreditation and other training facilities prior to coming to Canada delivered by Canadian South Asians who are already settled in Canada;
- Settlement support: a) Better job creation strategies and equitable hiring practices; b) better planned and coordinated system of services and bureaucracies which immigrants deal with; c) Expanding the notion of "settlement" and relevant services to include South Asians' sense of ongoing settlement and totality of their experience;
- "Post"-settlement support: a) Bringing South Asian communities together to challenge the funding structure and mobilize for resources; b) The full "Integration" of the community is only realized when the community no longer experience racism and outsider status.

The findings indicate that it is not enough to rearrange or add services within the settlement sector, it is necessary to reconceptualize "settlement". By questioning "settlement", Immigration policies and the premises upon which the "immigrant" is inferiorized are also problematized. These limited definitions are both the result and the cause of exclusion of South Asians experiences in service planning and provision. If ethnoracial communities such as South Asians were always to be considered and to live as outsiders even after being here for generations, then "settlement" should be about changing the status quo and transforming the marginalized space of settlement service sector to include all aspects of ethnoracial experience.

There is an artificial boundary between new "immigrants" and "settled" South Asians set up by current conceptualizations. This has real material consequences where those who are "settled" are supposed to be self-sufficient while those who are new immigrants are confined to the settlement sector with limited access to other services such as health care. Nevertheless, all South Asians remain "immigrants" because of their marginalized status as ethnoracial minorities. "Settlement" services are thus not the only support South Asians need. This raises questions about what "settlement" would look like outside of "settlement" service sector and whether an alternative conceptualization of "settlement" that is not service-contingent can be created.

Hence, the very premise upon which this research project has been conducted is potentially flawed as it excludes many types of immigrants who do not go to settlement service agencies and who do not go through the normal path of "settlement". For example, immigrants who go overseas to find work do not settle the way current conceptualization of "settlement" expects. Those who have been here for a long time may also face "settlement" issues but do not access settlement services because they are not seen as and do not consider themselves to be "immigrants" worthy of settlement service.

The most important lesson that can be learned from this project is that "South Asians" can reclaim their sense of community and mobilize themselves, not from ignoring the differences, but by understanding how these differences have been created and maintained, and work with one another to strengthen their political power.