



REFUSING TO SETTLE FOR LESS:

BUILDING PUBLIC POLICY
RECOMMENDATIONS TO INCREASE ACCESS
TO FAIR AND MEANINGFUL EMPLOYMENT
FOR NEWCOMERS.

**Participatory Action Research
Summary Report**

July – August 2009



“The Mennonite New Life Centre envisions a society in which people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds participate fully in all aspects of Canadian life. We will model an approach that brings together community engagement and community services, working together with newcomers to reduce insecurity and enable integration, strengthen voices and increase social equality”. New Life Vision Statement.

Introduction

The Mennonite New Life Centre is a nonprofit settlement organization with twenty-six years of experience working with newcomer communities. From its beginnings, the New Life Centre has given priority to the needs and participation of low-income newcomers, particularly asylum seekers and refugees experiencing the double trauma of persecution in their home society and racialized poverty in Canada. Today the New Life Centre is a vibrant multi-cultural organization with three program locations within the city of Toronto. We offer a range of programs, such as integrated settlement counseling, language instruction, leadership and advocacy initiatives, together with child-minding, youth and seniors programs, and mental health supports, among other activities.

In 2007, a community consultation and visioning process led the New Life Centre to identify community organizing and advocacy work as a priority for the future. A related priority involved addressing newcomer concerns with issues of poverty and access to employment.

In 2008, with the generous support of the Metcalf Foundation, the New Life Centre launched the pilot project **Newcomer Skills at Work: Refusing to Settle for Less.**

This project seeks to support, encourage and empower low-income newcomers to find fair and meaningful employment, while engaging them in analysis and advocacy to overcome systemic barriers.

The Newcomer Skills project has been a step forward in strengthening the capacity of the New Life Centre to respond to newcomer needs and aspirations in the areas of employment, leadership development and civic engagement. It incorporates employment mentoring activities, such as capacity building workshops and group mentoring for newcomers with a shared work background, while also promoting the participation of newcomers in advocacy-related efforts, through our Newcomer Advocacy Committees and the broader anti-poverty movement.

Newcomers Skill at Work Project Phase II (2009-2010)

During the second phase of our project, we gave priority to community engagement and advocacy, using participatory action research methodology to document collective analysis of employment barriers and proposed policy solutions. Both our employment mentoring groups and our newcomer advocacy committees contributed to this analysis.

To date, the Mennonite New Life Centre has consolidated five sector specific mentoring groups for newcomers with training and experience in the areas of mental health, community service, journalism, engineering and entrepreneurship. Experienced mentors offer practical support and guidance, while lending a sector perspective to analysis of employment barriers and opportunities.

In 2009, we consolidated and replicated our newcomer advocacy committee model as a locus for community mobilization and social change. At the time of writing, the New Life Centre has two newcomer advocacy committees, one relating to the Latin American community and one relating to the Chinese community.

This summer, we brought together the two groups, together with staff and board members, for an exciting and participative leadership training module facilitated by the Labour Education Centre. Through these workshops, participants built context specific knowledge and skills – familiarity with Canadian government structures and legislation, mapping of major stakeholders/coalitions, understanding of media context, etc.

They also practiced community organizing and advocacy skills, preparing for the launch of an advocacy campaign to promote the policy recommendations arising from our participatory action research.

Through the Newcomer Advocacy Committees, we have built partnerships with anti-poverty allies, monitoring implementation and results of the Ontario Anti-Poverty Strategy, and continuing to promote change proposals, including the Shared Framework of Action developed by the Colour of Poverty Campaign. The perspectives of our partners and allies will also help to shape the final policy recommendations arising from our participatory action research.

One of our vehicles for public education is **New Voices**, a bi-annual advocacy bulletin by and for newcomers.

New Voices writers, primarily internationally trained journalists, contribute thoughtful and well written articles on issues of immigration, employment and social change. Our fall 2009 edition will explore a range of perspectives on key policy recommendations arising from our research project, through interviews with newcomers, employers and policy makers.

We hope this research, and its dissemination, will contribute to public debate and political action to address the critical challenge of newcomer labour integration in Ontario.



Participatory Action Research: A tool for newcomer engagement and social change

From June to August 2009, the New Life Centre conducted a series of seven focus groups with newcomers as part of a participatory action research project carefully designed to promote collective analysis on employment barriers and public policy recommendations to improve access to fair and meaningful work.

Newcomer voice and leadership were central to the research process. Using Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, the project “embraced principles of participation and reflection, and empowerment and emancipation of groups seeking to improve their social situation” (Huges 2000).

Social researchers define participatory action research as “collective, self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social practices” (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988:5). PAR typically follows the 4 moments of action research, namely reflection, planning, action and observation. The four research moments exist interdependently and build on each other in a spiral or cycle.

Groups undertaking PAR identify a thematic concern, which is shaped into a common goal. Because participants share a commitment to this common goal, they are motivated and empowered to plan collective action for social change. PAR has proven useful in many settings to elicit progressive solutions to community problems.

To what extent is this methodology a useful approach for working with newcomers as the subjects of our own research?

We argue that participatory action research can be a useful tool for mobilizing newcomers to address



real-life problems by formulating collective solutions. PAR is widely recognized as a powerful strategy for guiding efforts towards social transformation, especially in times of change and challenge for marginalized people on the fringes of society (Okigbo et al. 2009; Bargal, 2006; Dick, 2006; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). More specifically, Collier (1945) found action research method ideal for studying and providing solutions to “problems of inter-ethnic relations.” Similarly, Mills (2000) recommends this method for improving intercultural group relations.

Clearly, the literature supports application of participatory action research methodology to the exploration of newcomer issues, including the racialized dimension of poverty in Canada. Through our focus groups, we encouraged active participation, subject involvement in seeking answers to problems, and the development of policy recommendations. In our experience, newcomer research participants were able to actively use their personal and collective experience as a source of analytical information to suggest practical solutions to overcome barriers of access to fair and meaningful employment.

In sum, PAR can be a powerful community organizing strategy, naming and mobilizing newcomer assets, while documenting a collective voice and vision. Already, this research project has been a place for mutual learning and transformation, with participants exposed to a variety of perspectives and experiences due to the multi sectoral and multi cultural context of this project.

We trust that it will continue to inspire fruitful dialogue and debate, engaging newcomers, anti-poverty allies, employers and policy makers in the search for innovative solutions to labour market integration, to the benefit of newcomers, and the benefit of our city.

Defining the research questions: Beyond the Canadian Experience

In 2008, the “Newcomer Skills at Work” project launched a series of focus groups to explore the employment experiences of newcomers and settlement workers and discuss proposals for change. In total, seven staff and forty newcomers participated in the focus groups. The newcomer participants, drawn from the Chinese and Latin American communities, had all arrived in Canada within the last five years. In each focus group, participants shared ideas and debated concepts through individual and group exercises.

Participants defined the notion of “immigrant success” and analyzed the barriers to achieving that success. For the most part, the notion of success was closely linked to the ideas of *community* and *employment*. In particular, participants highlighted the importance of job security and the opportunity to work in their field of expertise.

From the focus groups, it was apparent that different cultural communities experience similar barriers with regards to labour market integration. In particular, participants in all focus groups talked about employer expectations of “Canadian experience” as one of the major barriers to securing fair and meaningful employment. This was especially prominent for internationally trained professionals.

As we reflected further on the notion of “Canadian experience,” we began to ask new questions. Is the real issue the immigrant job applicant’s lack of “Canadian experience,” or does this way of stating the problem mask underlying practices of discrimination and exclusion. In other words, is the problem the immigrant or the system? Individual deficit or structural exclusion? Much employment programming focuses on helping newcomers fill gaps in knowledge or skills to prepare themselves for the Canadian job market. Yet the income gap between racialized and non-racialized workers continues to grow. Do we need better programs or better policies? Or maybe both?

Focus group participants clearly stated that government had a strong responsibility and could play an important role in designing public policies to improve newcomer access to fair and meaningful employment. Participants also suggested that settlement agencies are well placed to engage newcomers on program and policy issues. Doing so would allow organizations to improve programs, formulate policy recommendations and put forward creative solutions to systemic injustices faced by newcomers. Collective problem solving would help guarantee that all members of the community are treated fairly and that, over the long term, future newcomers have more possibilities for success.

Building on the results of these focus groups, we designed a new participatory action research process to address the following questions:

- What are the structural barriers underlying the problem of “Canadian experience”?
- What program and policy recommendations could address these structural barriers and improve equitable access to fair and meaningful employment?

The pages that follow describe the process and results of asking and answering these questions.

“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



Analytical Framework: Participant recruitment and data collection

In keeping with the activist nature of PAR, participant recruitment for this research project was aligned with our community organizing work. The spring of 2009 was dedicated to strengthening and replicating our employment mentoring groups and newcomer advocacy committees. By June 2009, we were ready to begin our focus groups. Focus groups were conducted with four sector specific mentoring groups – psychologists, community service workers, journalists and engineers – and two newcomer advocacy committees. A seventh focus groups was conducted with settlement staff, most of whom were first generation immigrants serving fellow newcomers. In total, 45 participants were actively involved in the focus groups.

Quantitative data about participants' demographic backgrounds, as well as qualitative information about their experience of settlement and integration, were documented in a self-administered survey distributed by the facilitators at the beginning of each focus group. Specifically, the survey included questions related to participants' immigration status, career trajectory and annual income since their arrival in Canada, together with self-assessment of English language ability, and improvement or deterioration of their standard of living due to migration.

Of note, 25 out of 45 participants reported that their situation had "deteriorated" since arrival in Canada. 37% were currently unemployed, and 60% were NOT "working in their field of study." 53% reported annual incomes below \$20 000. Unfortunately, our research confirms the widely held perception that Canada is not living up to its promise for new immigrants.

In order to further explore root causes and solutions to this problem, popular education techniques were used to elicit qualitative data through three group exercises: Identifying Assets,

Analyzing Barriers, and Proposing Recommendations or Action Plans. In the first exercise, the facilitators asked participants to identify four categories of "assets" that were relevant to the integration process: individual assets, job-related assets, community assets, and cultural assets.

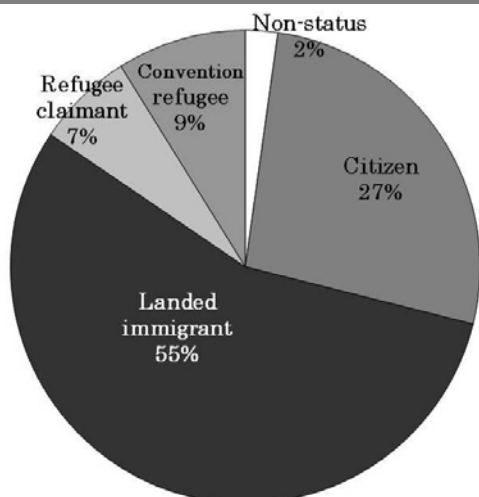
In the next exercise, the facilitators introduced the "Iceberg Model", as a visual tool for participants to use in exploring their experience of systemic barriers underlying the commonly cited obstacle of "Canadian experience." The facilitators separated participants into groups to analyze one of four categories of access barriers: socio/cultural barriers, educational barriers, economic barriers, and "others." A representative of each group reported back on key barriers and their impact on settlement and labour market integration for newcomers.

After the collective analysis of barriers, the research facilitators guided participants through a process of prioritizing the most salient barriers. Using "dotmocracy," the group arrived at agreement on two or three key barriers for further analysis during the final step of proposing practical solutions. Through group reflection and discussion, newcomers generated policy recommendations and action plans to address systemic barriers to achieving fair and meaningful employment. In the pages that follow, we summarize the key barriers and policy recommendations emerging from the participatory action research process.

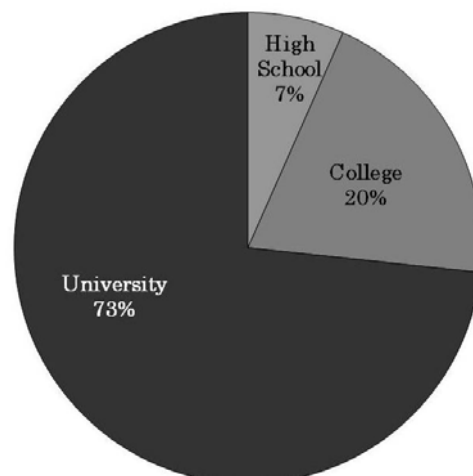
Participant Profile: Highlights

- Median age: 40
- 25 female, 20 male
- 10 different countries of origin
- 56% Latin-American and 40% Chinese.
- 73% had attended university in their home country; 38% had pursued higher education in Canada.
- 37% were currently unemployed.
- 60% were NOT "working in their field of study".
- 25 of 45 participants reported that their situation had "deteriorated" since arrival in Canada
- 53% of the participants reported annual incomes between CAD 10,000 and 20,000.

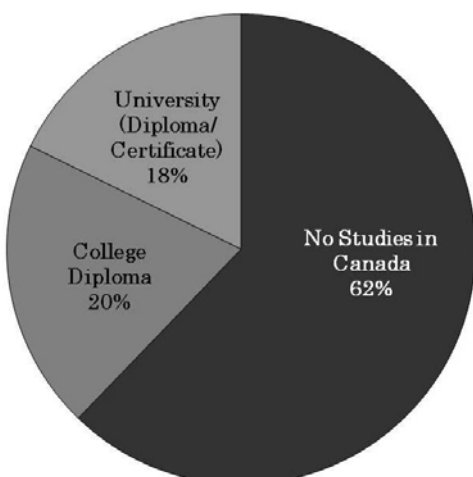
Surveys were self-administered and answered in the participants' first language. We assume credible responses to each item, and a minimal level of misunderstanding due to language factors.



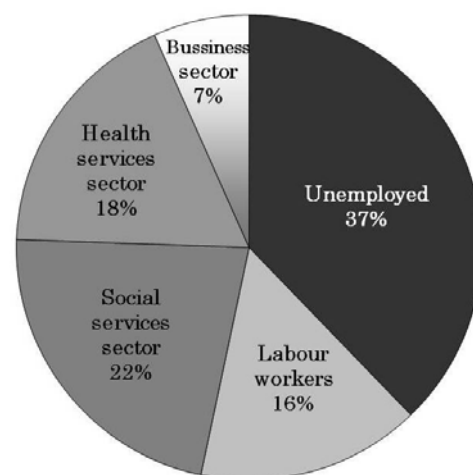
The sample group of participants represented ten different countries of origin and 91% had permanent status in Canada.



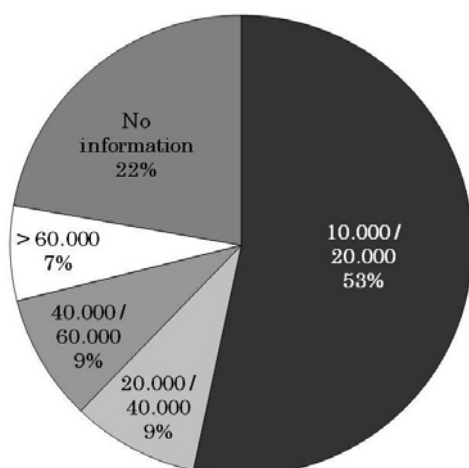
The participants were educated in seventeen different disciplines, and 33 out of 45 participants had attended university.



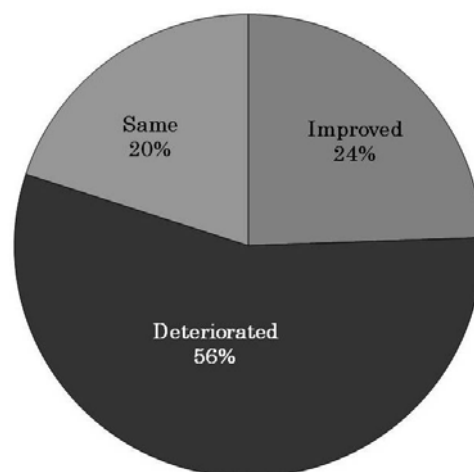
38% of participants had higher education in Canada.



12 out of 45 participants were currently unemployed and 27 reported they were NOT "working in their field of study".



24 out of 45 participants reported their annual incomes were below C\$20,000.



25 out of 45 participants thought their situation had "deteriorated" since their arrival in Canada.

PAR- Main Findings

Immigration Process

Barriers	Suggested policy recommendations
Canadian government promotes migration through embassies around the world. They often raise false expectations by assuring internationally trained professionals that they will find well paid employment in their field in less than six months.	Pre-departure orientation in Canadian embassies overseas should offer realistic information about employment opportunities for newcomers in Canada.
Settlement process puts newcomers in new and stressful situations. Settlement agencies lack resources to implement life skills programs.	The government should allow for greater flexibility in settlement programming, so as to allow for innovative responses to the challenges faced by newcomers, including programs such as “life skills”.
Canadian immigration policy discriminates between skilled and temporary workers (e.g. seasonal, agricultural).	The government should completely eliminate the differentiation between skilled and temporary workers and offer to all permanent status and the associated rights/guarantees.

Labour Market Incentives

Barriers	Suggested policy recommendations
There are no economic incentives for Canadian employers to hire newcomer professionals.	The federal government could provide tax breaks or direct funding for employers who create jobs for newcomer professionals. <i>Alternate formulation: Establish and promote a government fund to help employers create paid internships for newcomers.</i>
Local economy is not prepared to accept foreigners.	Initiate and implement a round table mechanism whereby government, employers and professional regulators meet on an ongoing basis to review and improve the integration of immigrants in the labour market.
Welfare system pushes newcomers to get survival jobs. No incentives for newcomers to study English/French.	Social Services to establish relationships with different sectors (business, health, social sector) to promote one year internship programs for newcomers to work in their field. Internships promoted to employers as “Canadian experience”.
Because the community service industry creates increasingly more temporary/ part-time jobs, newcomers returning to university/college are hesitant to invest time and money in this field of study to secure low-paid and unstable jobs.	In addition to providing settlement services, community agencies should provide more internship/volunteer opportunities for newcomers interested in pursuing a career in community services.

Hiring Process

Barriers	Suggested policy recommendations
There are no legislative requirements for Canadian employers to hire newcomers.	Canadian enterprises must hire newcomers at no less than a specific percentage (e.g., 5%) of all new hires for a given year. <i>Alternate formulation: Pass employment equity legislation obliging employers to ensure equitable representation of diverse groups in the work place.</i>
Lack of “social capacity” to settle and integrate immigrants. Immigrants are not recognized.	Government should legislate hiring policy and practice (example: printing and broadcasting media industries must hire a certain percentage of immigrant employees). <i>Alternate formulation: Pass employment equity legislation obliging employers to ensure equitable representation of diverse groups in the work place.</i>
Commitment to multiculturalism not reflected in labour market context. Cultural stereotyping disqualifies newcomers from competing for leadership positions (e.g. Chinese can only be good chefs. Latin American women can only be employed for cleaning).	The government and/or industry associations must regulate hiring processes to ensure fair and transparent decisions. Fund ethnic communities to lead and implement an awareness campaign around the assets of internationally trained individuals and immigrant communities.
Newcomers lack the contacts and experience to develop the kinds of career networks which are critically important for Canadian jobseekers.	Requirement of a Canadian job reference should be illegal. Develop guidelines for employers, including credible strategies for evaluating the skills and verifying references of internationally trained applicants.
Employers often refuse to hire applicants with the number “9” in their Social Insurance Number.	Although the ESA does not permit employers to ask for a SIN number prior to making a job offer, this is common practice. SIN numbers should not distinguish between permanent and temporary immigration status (i.e., remove the use of the number “9”).
Volunteer work is often not recognized as relevant “Canadian experience” by employers.	Public education campaign to promote recognition of volunteer work as Canadian experience.

Labour Rights

Barriers	Suggested policy recommendations
Given the financial pressure newcomers face at the beginning of their settlement process, many accept precarious “survival jobs.” In these jobs, labour rights violations are common due to the lack of employer accountability.	The government should create neighbourhood employment offices with a mandate for monitoring and enforcing ESA (should have power to fine employers for violating labour rights?) The government should promote access to the Human Rights Commission for all workers regardless of their migration status The government should create a special division or office of the Ministry of Labour dedicated to monitoring employment sectors with a high proportion of precarious work (for e.g., cleaning agencies, banquet halls, factories, etc)

Internationally Training / Credential Recognition

Barriers	Suggested policy recommendations
Recognition of foreign credentials is expensive.	Establish and promote a government loan fund for newcomers to access the credential recognition process.
Internationally trained professionals are not able to have their degree(s) recognized <i>de facto</i> by Canadian employers. Word-by-word translations of educational documents are not helpful when applying for jobs.	The Canadian government must establish fair and transparent standards for evaluating foreign education in comparison to domestic equivalents. In the case of landed immigrants, credential evaluation/ recognition should take place overseas during the application process (often several years) so as to expedite labour market integration post-arrival.
Non recognition of the foreign credentials of immigrants. Current process focuses on academic degree rather than evaluation of competence.	The government should require professional regulators to establish and disclose a fair and transparent process to evaluate relevant competence and knowledge. The government should create an annual system of “quotas” for professional associations or colleges. These associations should be required to incorporate a certain number of internationally trained professionals on an annual basis. The government should continue to fund and expand “Bridging Programs”.

Language Training programs

Barriers	Suggested policy recommendations
Language Barrier: LINC program has yet to be adequately recognized by employers. Employers may reject your job application for language reasons even if you are a LINC Level 8 student.	The government should promote a standardized language exam for newcomers, so as to offer employers a way of fairly evaluating language ability. Employers and professional associations should have input into language curriculum development so as to make instruction more relevant to the needs of the workplace. Government should review LINC curriculum, with the goal of extending course content beyond “survival English”. Government should increase Academic English programs, remove existing eligibility requirements of one year in Ontario, and create a scholarship program for language students. Given that they have been accepted as skilled workers on the basis of their professional background, internationally trained professionals should be guaranteed occupation specific language training by the federal and/or provincial government in order to facilitate labour market integration.
Given that language instruction programs do not offer enough child minding spaces, parents have to stay at home, reducing their opportunities to improve their language skills.	Increase number of childminding spaces available through LINC and introduce childminding in ESL programs.
Language students with financial responsibility for a family (e.g. single mothers) find it difficult to study on a full time basis because of the conflict between work (temp/ “survival jobs”) and study.	The government must provide all language students who are officially registered in an ESL or LINC program with a reasonable amount of monthly income. <i>Alternate formulation: Increase social assistance rates.</i> Language programs must provide child care to single mothers. <i>Alternate formulation: Increase child minding spaces for LINC Programs and introduce child minding for ESL Programs.</i>

Next Steps

In **October 2009**, we will work with the Public Good Initiative of the School of Public Policy at the University of Toronto to shape formal policy briefs to be presented to decision makers.

In **December**, we will publish the fall issue of our advocacy bulletin "New Voices." In this publication, internationally trained journalists will present and examine policy recommendation arising from this research.

Early next year, we are planning a public forum to discuss and debate our proposals with newcomers and anti-poverty allies, employers and public policy makers.

During the next year, our **Newcomer Advocacy Committees** are planning to follow the campaign for Toronto Council Elections 2010. Our plan is to present the policy recommendations outlined in this report and advocate with council candidates to commit to action on improving access to fairly paid and meaningful employment for newcomers.

The New Life Centre and our **Newcomer Advocacy Committees** will continue strengthening our partnership with anti-poverty allies in the work of social change.

Suggested Reading

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New Voices

We are pleased to announce that the second edition of our newsletter will be released next **December**. It will analyze some preliminary results of this Participatory Action Research!

“The Mennonite New Life Centre recognizes that each migration and settlement experience is unique and influenced by intersecting oppressions. In our services and advocacy, we will acknowledge and challenge barriers and discrimination faced on grounds including ethnicity, race/colour, religion/creed, political opinion, country of origin, citizenship/immigration status, age, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, family status, type of housing, neighbourhood of residence, language, and ability.”

New Life Commitment to Anti-Opression



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