



# Nonprofit engagement with provincial policy officials: The case of NGO policy voice in Canadian immigrant settlement services

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## Abstract

This paper explores the role of nonprofit organizations in the immigrant settlement and integration sector in the public policy process in three Canadian provinces. Drawing on thirty one (31) semi-structured interviews with nonprofit and mid-level policy officials (working for a provincial government) in three provinces (Ontario, British Columbia and Saskatchewan), the place of nonprofit agencies in providing input and voice to policy issues in the area of settlement and integration services is presented. Issues regarding the willingness to use advocacy/voice with government funders, the usefulness of government consultations, strategies used in approaching government, the role of research in making evidence-based cases regarding policy and program change, among other considerations are examined. The assessments provided by key nonprofit actors and government policy officials are used to bring better understanding of the perceived roles of nonprofit organizations in the daily work of policy.

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## 1. Introduction: research context

This article explores the role of nonprofit organizations in the immigrant settlement and integration sector in the public policy process in three of Canada's provinces.

Using semi-structured interviews with non-government and mid-level provincial government policy workers in three provinces (Ontario, British Columbia and Saskatchewan) the real influence of non-governmental agencies in providing input and voice to policy issues in this policy field at the sub-national level is presented. This study seeks to critically examine the assumption of New Public Governance (NPG) theory that frames policy work as a multi-actor exercise through an exploration of advocacy/voice by nonprofit agencies, the effectiveness of government policy consultations, strategies used by nonprofit agencies in opening policy dialogue with government, and the role of evidence-based research in policy and program change. The assessments of key non-governmental actors and government policy officials of these policy advocacy activities are used to bring better understanding of the role of NGOs in the daily work of policy engagement with provincial governments.

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## 2. Immigrant settlement and integration services

The focus of this case study is immigrant settlement and integration services provided by the province but delivered by nonprofit service providers. This makes a particularly compelling case study because there has been a long relationship between government in Canada and nonprofit organizations in the provision of supports for newcomers to this country. This Canadian model of settlement services has generated considerable interest internationally, and has often been seen as a case of best practice. The reshaping of this NGO-government relationship, within the context of New Public Management (NPM) reforms, has in more recent years placed more strain on this form of NGO-government ‘partnership’ (Halligan, 2011; Richmond & Shields, 2005). Historically this policy area (settlement services) has been the primary domain of the Federal Government. Even though immigration is one of those constitutionally shared areas of jurisdiction the federal government has led the development of settlement services. A more substantive provincial role, beyond the special role the Province of Quebec has assumed beginning in the late 1960s, in direct support for immigrant settlement within their territory is of more recent origin (Atkinson et al., 2013, 14–15). The greater provincial presence in this policy area has emerged for a variety of reasons. Primary among these have been the impact of neoliberal governance models which have centered on devolving responsibilities. The provincial involvement in these services has however developed unevenly and the place and impact of immigration varies considerably across provinces. Both Ontario and British Columbia have been long standing traditional locations of newcomer settlement, particularly the metropolitan areas of Toronto and Vancouver which continue to receive the largest share of incoming immigrants. In fact, more than 70% of the foreign born population in Canada is found in these two provinces (Statistics Canada, 2013, 9). By contrast, Saskatchewan, until recently, struggled to maintain even its domestically born population base, has begun to attract a newcomer population and has undertaken more aggressive recruiting to feed the province’s rapidly expanding labor market. Its share of the annual landings of newcomers, while still very modest, increased from 1.5% (4835) to 2.7% (6890) of Canada’s total between 2007 and 2009 (Saskatchewan Ministry of Advanced Education, Employment and Immigration, 2009, 4). Overall, Canada according to our latest 2011 Census enjoys the highest proportion of foreign born population among the G8 rich nations at 20.8% (CBC, 2013).

While historically immigration and settlement policy in Canada has been largely set nationally, settlement and integration remains inherently a process that takes place at the sub-national level (Vengroff, 2013) this helps to explain why locally-based NGOs have taken the lead in settlement provision. The density and range of NGO settlement service providers in BC and Ontario, particularly in the larger urban areas, have been considerable and the development of settlement infrastructure took strong roots in these provinces by the 1970s (Biles, Tolley, Andrew, Esses, & Burstein, 2011; Hiebert & Sherrell, 2011). Saskatchewan developed much later in this regard and are only now building capacity (Garcea, 2011). Sector wide umbrella organizations in settlement formed at the provincial level in BC (Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC (AMSSA)) and Ontario (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI)) in the late 1970s and took a decade longer to emerge in Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant and Settlement Integration Agencies (SAISIA)). Their role in research, policy development and direct mandates for political advocacy varies as well. OCASI embraces all three roles, AMSAA does not do political advocacy, and SAISIA does not have a mandate for either research or political advocacy, although they all do engage in other collective voice and government engagement functions (OCASI & CISSA, 2014: 32, 2–6).

The Province of BC was one of the earlier sub-national governments to take on a greater role in settlement and immigration. This was greatly facilitated by an agreement between BC and the Federal Government which started in 1998 to devolve with funding settlement services to the province (Hiebert & Sherrell, 2011, 82–83). Currently however, as part of wide ranging set of Federal reforms to immigration policy this agreement has been canceled and settlement is being ‘repatriated’ back to the national government. This has caused considerable anxiety and confusion among settlement organizations in the province. The Province of Ontario also got a settlement devolution agreement with the Federal Government but the national government has refused to renew this 5 year arrangement. Ontario has had for a considerable period of time a separate department, Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration (MCI), which handles immigration issues (Biles et al., 2011). Saskatchewan by contrast has never had a settlement agreement with the Federal Government and the immigration portfolio has regularly shifted between different ministries (Garcea, 2011).

Settlement services are about providing various forms of support and assistance to immigrant populations which help newcomers get established in, and meet their core needs/requirements, for their integration into their new

homeland. The goal of settlement services is to support immigrants' short and longer-term needs to make the transitions toward being able to fully participate in the economy and society. Immigrant settlement and integration, and the services associated with these goals are characterized by the following:

- *Adjustment*: acclimatization and getting use to the new culture, language, people and environment or coping with the situation.
- *Adaptation*: learning and managing the situation without a great deal of help.
- *Integration*: actively participating, getting involved and contributing as citizen of a new country (OCASI & COSTI, 1999: Chapter 2, 1).

Settlement services tend to be focused in the areas of: (1) language acquisition and proficiency; (2) employment-related services; (3) housing; and (4) information workshops and settlement counseling services. Settlement and integration policies are more than just administrative decisions, they are also established programs and practices that provide a general reflection of what the society believes should be the place of immigrants in their communities (Siemiatycki & Triadafilopoulos, 2010). Moreover, these policies point to the warmth of the newcomers welcome (Reitz, 1998) to their new society, and the policies provide something of a blueprint regarding how and by what paths immigrants will be supported in their journey toward accommodation, acceptance and integration. Given that newcomers constitute a vulnerable population, especially since some 70% of them are identifiable minorities, nonprofit organizations and frontline agencies that service this population have a special role to play in giving voice to newcomer concerns and interests to government policymakers.

### **3. Context setting: NGO advocacy and developments in governance and public administration – a brief overview**

Advocacy is one of the key roles that nonprofit NGOs play within modern society. Providing a voice to the communities they serve, especially vulnerable ones, is important for democracy and, in the case of immigrants, for their effective integration into society (Evans & Shields, 2010; Richmond & Shields, 2005; Shragge, 2013, 47). Laforest (2001, 8) has defined advocacy broadly as “the act of voicing the concerns and needs of the constituency, conveying their opinion and representing their interest to the state”. Carter, Plewes, and Echenberg (2005, 6) have categorized the policy voice role of nonprofit organizations as involving the following categories: “(1) identifying issues on the policy agenda; (2) developing policy solutions through research and analysis, i.e. policy-ready research; and (3) promoting particular policy solutions” which includes mobilizing, protesting and demonstrating, lobbying government and other forms of advocacy including dialoguing with government.

One useful way of thinking about nonprofit advocacy is what Creese has called ‘big advocacy’ versus ‘small advocacy’. Big advocacy involves employing a more public form to addressing policy change which includes “challenging government programs and policies that affect immigrants, refugees and settlement workers” (1998, 28). ‘Small advocacy’ concerns activities that involve more ‘behind the scenes’, day to day interface and ‘consultation’ that occurs between state officials and NGO personnel (Creese, 1998, 27). The advocacy on the part of nonprofits that takes place here means taking on something of an insider role where educating officials rather than confronting the state becomes the focus. Of course, as Gormley and Cymrot note, the effectiveness of insider strategies rests on the presumption that meaningful access to government exists and that the NGOs are listened to and have a reasonable ability to actually influence the policy and programming (2006, 104). This study is particularly centered around examining the ‘small advocacy’ role of nonprofits in settlement and integration policy.

Wayland reminds us that nonprofit advocacy is about relationships that involve engagement with the state resulting in “both collaboration and conflict” (Wayland, 2006: 1). Insider strategies rest upon a collaboration focus. Jedwab, for one, maintains that in the immigration field that the best and most successful relationships between nonprofits and governments have been constructed upon the foundations of consultation and consensus building rather than competition and conflict (Jedwab, 2002, 77). This, however, presupposes openness and the state accepting nonprofit organizations as partners in a larger policy process. Numerous analysts do not see such an approach as matching current reality (Caragata & Basu, 2013, 329–330; Shragge, 2013), while others see more openness in the Canadian policy process (Burstein, 2010; Tolley, Biles, Vineberg, Burstein, & Frideres, 2011).

Clearly the dominant governance paradigm concerning state–society relationships, policy development and state–nonprofit relationships are important for determining the kind of interaction that is likely to shape nonprofit voice. Contemporary Canadian public policy has been guided by neoliberalism which has structured public administration through the adoption of NPM (Shields & Evans, 1998). One significant result has been a marketization of the state–nonprofit relationship where nonprofits have been recast as an alternative service delivery agent (Alford & O’Flynn, 2012; Kelly & Caputo, 2012; Shields & Evans, 1998). This relationship has been particularly governed by the state’s use of short term contract financing of programs which nonprofit organizations are compelled to compete for. The relationship between the state and nonprofit service providers is reframed less around policy co-production (Alford, 2002) toward one built on vertical control and accountabilities which actually extend the government regulation of the sector (Phillips and Smith, 2011, 3). Thus, government-funded nonprofits have been characterized as the ‘shadow civil service’ (Laforest, 2011, 37). The use of contract financing has created competitive quasi-markets for service delivery (McLaughlin, Osborne, & Ferlie, 2002). While this has succeeded in restructuring the nonprofit service sector along quasi-market lines, from a community perspective, many negative consequences have resulted entailing unintended and undesirable outcomes. Examples include competition that leads to significant fragmentation of services; insufficient nonprofit providers to promote effective competition (Phillips & Smith, 2011, 3); the short-term nature of contracts and their under-financing which compromises the ongoing viability of delivery organizations (Eakin, 2005); and excessive accountability rules that result in more compliant agencies, at the price of excessive administrative costs and the stifling of innovation; all of which seriously compromises optimal service provision. Problems of administrative ‘red tape’ have been identified as helping to ‘kill the nonprofit golden goose’ (Smith & Smyth, 2010). Such administrative accountability challenges have been forcefully raised by the Federal Government’s Blue Ribbon Panel on Grants and Contributions which is supported by the nonprofit sector (Burstein, 2010: 3) but little in the way of adoption of these reforms have yet been forthcoming, especially at the national level.

A significant consequence of the contract funding regime for settlement services is that nonprofit NGOs have very limited resources with which to take on their advocacy role. The agencies are further required to engage in competitive bidding against each other in order to win a contract. And there is the additional tension created where there is a “desire to engage in effective advocacy, with the government as their primary target, yet they depend heavily on government funding” (Wayland, 2006, 3). This can result in ‘advocacy chill’. At the Federal level in particular there has been evidence of such a chill and even threats to the charitable status of some vocal NGO advocates (Douglas, 2012; Tides Canada, 2012). Andrew Griffith, a former CIC senior official, makes note of how political staff in Ottawa have been looking closely at nonprofit service providers to ensure that they are not misaligned with the policy priorities of the government (Griffith, 2013).

The economic crisis of 2008 which has brought forward a wide ranging austerity agenda has placed additional stress on the NGO settlement sector. Rising levels of unemployment and social dislocation among newcomers has increased demand for services at the very time that settlement funding is being cut (Shields, 2014). This is promoting a widespread restructuring and ‘rationalization’ of government settlement support (Burstein, 2010: 2) which has further taxed the capacity of the sector.

Thus the neoliberalization of the nonprofit sector discourages traditional advocacy roles which become framed by government as special interest activities (Evans & Shields, 2010). But the decentralization and devolution of the state has opened up gaps which NGOs can fill. Specifically, as the state’s research capacities have been diminished and the state may be compelled to rely upon more outside input in developing public policy.

Within public administration, the limitations of NPM have spurred the promotion of the New Public Governance (NPG) model of an emerging pluralist relationship between the state and non-governmental actors (Osborne, 2010). NPG identifies the need for a shift to horizontal accountability and co-governance while moving away from narrow command and control, rule compliant structures. The end result is policy co-production marked by collaborative relationships in which power is shared and where the advocacy role of nonprofit providers is recognized as an important function (Baldwin & Black, 2008). NPG includes enhanced and more flexible funding supports that have longer time horizons and which promote networks over cut-throat competition (Phillips & Smith, 2011, 4–6). A consequence of the shrinkage of state policy capacity is the need for a more collaborative and inclusive practice of policymaking (Baskoy, Evans, & Shields, 2011).

Partnerships within the nonprofit sector are based on mutual trust and power sharing. However, competitive contractualization and the resulting marketization of the sector has transformed this culture. The movement toward NPG would go some distance in constructing more equitable partnerships and more meaningful and less disruptive

Table 1  
Distribution of settlement services policy officials interviews.

	Government officials	Nonprofit officials
Ontario	5	6
British Columbia	5	6
Saskatchewan	4	5
Total	14	17 = 31

accountability measures. The question remains as to whether there is evidence of such a shift toward this NPG paradigm. Examining the nature of the interaction between mid-level government policy officials and NGO policy actors, and the scope given to nonprofit voices in policy, is the focus of this study. The extent and quality of policy interaction at this level should provide some measure of the uptake of NPG approaches to policy governance in the sub-national immigrant services arena. Our findings suggest, however, that meaningful policy engagement between provincial governments and the NGO settlement sector remains limited.

#### 4. Methodology

The research presented here employed 31 semi-structured interviews with key informants working for non-profit immigrant settlement services agencies and with policy workers in the provincial government ministry responsible for co-ordinating and developing policy affecting the sector. Consult Table 1 for the breakdown of interviews conducted by province.

The government-based interviews were drawn from public servants occupying the ranks of policy and program advisors, analysts and managers involved in various dimensions of immigrant settlement and integration activities. The nongovernmental participants came from a range of not-for-profit organizations whose work engaged immigrant populations as it related to settlement and integration. These nonprofit organizations ranged from smaller frontline immigrants settlement service agencies to large multi-service organizations to organizations with a more explicit research, planning and advocacy mandate.

An internet search was used to find potential interview subjects and referrals from earlier interviewees were sometimes used to identify other potential interview candidates. This was a nonrandom sample. The interviews were conducted between the summer of 2012 and May 2013. The interview questions followed a semi-structured format but the interviewer was free to pursue lines of inquiry that arose during the discussion. The interviews were about one hour in length. All transcriptions were coded to identify key themes and issues using a double blind coding procedure.

The interviews were not designed to be a statistically representative sample but they do enable us to identify and explore overarching themes, issues and perspectives derived directly from actors engaged in various positions in the policy process. This provides us with a unique opportunity to capture the lived policy experience of these actors and develop a rich and deep level of analysis of the content of the interviews.

While the policy capacity of government has been challenged by the shrinkage in the size and resources of the civil service (Baskoy et al., 2011), the advocacy, research and policy capacities of nonprofit organizations have been even more constrained due to strict funding rules and funding cutbacks by governments who are the key source of financing of human and social service nonprofit agencies (Evans, Richmond, & Shields, 2005). Given the lean nonprofit workforce this entails and the continuous pressure to do ever more with less, few nonprofit organizations have the ability to devote staff to dedicated policy positions. Indeed, in the three provinces examined here, 67.2% of NGOs were found to have no staff dedicated exclusively to policy work. In contrast, only 14.5% of government respondents indicated that there were no dedicated policy staff (Evans & Wellstead, 2013, 71). Consequently, for NGOs, policy work is very often performed ‘on the side of the desk’.

#### 5. A qualitative examination of policy interaction in settlement services: emerging themes and issues under ‘voice’

The interviews probed the theme of the place and role of the voice of NGOs in immigrant settlement and integration policy. The goal was to give scope to the voices of those who have experience in engaging with the public policy

process. This allowed the identification of a number of sub-themes and issues related to the overarching theme of nonprofit agency voice. While there were different experiences and observations regarding nonprofit actors' engagement with provincial policy officials, there is also considerable consensus relating to these experiences. Listening to these voices allow for the exploration of a deeper understanding of themes and issues which are not able to be fully captured in the raw numbers of surveys. Interviews can provide us with a sense of the meaning behind and seeing beyond the numbers.

In addressing the question of nonprofit voice, the interviews focused on those from the NGO community. However, we also looked at the government perspective. These interviews provide insight into the government understanding and purpose of consultations with non-governmental organizations. To better understand public servants' perspectives on such issues is important in order to comprehend how closely government and nonprofit-based views correspond, as well as to assess the overall possibilities and limitations regarding the policy impact of nonprofit voice in government.

## **6. What is consultation with external groups for? Is it effective? (government practitioner perspectives)**

Gaining a perspective on what government policy officials believe the purpose and objectives of external policy consultation is and how they assess the effectiveness of such, is of immense practical importance for NGOs. Consultations are used for a variety of purposes in government. In some cases they are genuinely about gathering information to inform and shape policy innovation. In other cases, policy directions have been predetermined and the consultation process is more about discovering and overcoming possible obstacles to the already decided direction of government policy. If the consultation takes place late in the policy cycle it is almost always of the later type. Still, it is clear that consultation with the settlement service sector is seen by government policy workers as an important activity. The information and front-line knowledge of settlement services NGOs is viewed by government as very useful to them. These agencies are strategically positioned to observe the needs and conditions of newcomer populations and to enjoy a connectedness and trust in the community in a way that government is not positioned to realize.

Interviews with provincial government policy workers testify to this and the complexity of the relationship. A BC government informant acknowledged the value of NGO front-line knowledge noting that the agencies "have access to a lot of information that we sitting here in our offices typing away" do not possess (BCGOV3). An Ontario informant understood consultation with agencies as being useful but cautioned that the government objectives in conducting such consultations may not be aligned to the agencies' objectives. They observed that the effectiveness of the process "depends to a certain extent, if you genuinely have been given the mandate to involve stakeholders and have discussions with them", this can be "very helpful in terms of coming to grips with complicated or sensitive policy issues". But "if it is just a kind of tell us where the land mines are, it is less valuable" (OntGov1). A second Ontario informant added that a key shortcoming was that these consultations are sometimes intended to meet "internal needs" of the government and serve only to better inform deputy ministers and ministers rather than to inform policy innovation and solve a problem (OntGov2).

The interviews with government policy officials did not provide strong evidence of a robust new public governance approach to seeking outside advice in shaping policy. Still, according to government-based interviews, openings do exist in the system where consultation can have an effect and the information about clients and programs remains valuable to policy officials in helping them shape their own construction policy advice.

## **7. Is the policy consultation process open or predetermined? (nonprofit practitioners)**

Interviews with settlement agency informants reveal a set of perspectives on the nature and effectiveness of their engagement with government policy officials. With regard to the nature of the policy consultation process virtually all of the agency-based interviewees were of the view that policy consultations were largely predetermined or that there was only "a very limited degree of openness" (OntNGO8). Their experience of policy engagement with government was often simply frustrating. Despite providing what they viewed as relevant information and perspectives that would benefit policy design, this was too often not heeded. NGO informants across all three provinces shared similar observations. A BC informant understood consultation as less than sincere as key issues respecting policy design were "pre-determined" and the only genuine aspect of consultation was concerned with the remaining "minutiae" (BCNGO4). An Ontario informant saw such processes as tightly controlled where the government was not interested "genuine consultation and partnership" (OntNGO8). And a Saskatchewan agency worker did not see any form of

engagement with the government but rather the relationship was one of command and control where service providers are “told what to do and that is what we must do” (SKNGO1).

There appeared to be some provincial variation regarding the level of consultation with BC displaying a greater propensity to engage the service agencies in policy discussions and Saskatchewan the least so. In terms of the NPG image of open and meaningful consultation, the interviews suggest this is far from the reality in the three Canadian provinces.

## **8. What is more important the political or bureaucratic part of government in the policy process? (nonprofit practitioners)**

When the question of whether the public service or political side of government is more important in the policy process, the prevailing view from the service agencies was that the political side of government was a more important actor in the policy process than the public service. This conclusion derives from a keen awareness of the political nature of policy-making and the realization that political factors can trump all else.

When probed more deeply, however, beyond single statement responses, many service agency respondents provide a more complex answer. A more strategic understanding emerges where identifying which level within government is to be approached, the public service or the political, becomes dependent upon the issue. There is also a realization that while politicians and political staff tend to have relatively short tenure with a policy portfolio, the public service is a constant, and hence it is important to develop good working relationships with them. Which side was more influential varied by province but some balancing of efforts between public service and the political arm was the prevailing view. Ontario respondents, for example, identified the political side as most influential but also acknowledged the public service contribution. One Ontario interviewee responded: “Political. But bureaucrats are also important as they have influence and they’re more accessible” (OntNGO10). A countering view was expressed by a BC agency worker: “We have found that our ability to engage at the senior civil servant level can, depending on the circumstance, have more influence than going the political route” (BCNGO2). Another confirmed this, stating “the bureaucratic level it is very important” (BCNGO1). However, a shift in focus in BC may be underway as another BC respondent observed: “NGOs in the general area in settlement services have begun to pay more attention to trying to build links with political staff more than public servants” (BCNGO5).

The difference in views between BC and Ontario interviewees may be explained by the efforts the Ontario government since the Liberals entered government in 2003 to engage the non-profit sector in a cooperative relationship with the Ontario Government. This was formalized in 2010 with the launch by the Liberal Government of the Partnership Project which is promoting mutual respect and more flexible and sustaining partnering with nonprofit providers ([Ontario Trillium Foundation and Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2011](#)).

## **9. Use of coalition advocacy (nonprofit practitioners)**

Settlement service agencies can amplify their voice by joining together within sector wide umbrella organizations. Province-wide umbrella associations for the sector speak with a collective voice for the sector’s service providing agencies. Each of the three provinces have such sector-wide organizations. These sector-wide organizations are generally more effective in gaining access to government as established lines of communication are already in place. It is also easier for government to deal with a single sector voice when consulting on an issue rather than attempting to coordinate consultation with multiple settlement service agencies. A BC informant captured this succinctly saying: “So the policy engagement work, if it is to be effective, has to be undertaken in more collaborative ways, using provincial umbrella associations and other bodies to promote and engage and set priorities. The effectiveness of developing common messaging or common policy areas within the sector means that it is easier for government to hear what we have to say” (BCNGO2).

In addition, an important consideration for individual service agencies is that they are not singularly attached to particular positions. Their role as a service provider is typically financed, in whole or in part, through government funds. Being identified as an advocate of a particular policy alternative may make them vulnerable to government sanction.

The umbrella organizations are also better placed in terms of employing dedicated staff and resources to enhance capacity for effective advocacy and research – such a level of advocacy capacity is beyond the reach of most service

providing organizations. Organizational scale and capacity are related. As a Saskatchewan based informant observed: “As you are larger you have more voice . . . I believe that you are more noticed yes, or we are more considered, yes. But is it because people are more sensitive or because government is more sensitive or is it because we are bigger? I would say it is mostly because we are bigger” (SKNGO1).

Moreover, in terms of the external forms of advocacy, so-called ‘Big Advocacy’, that involves public education campaigns, the use of media, and other public oriented activities, the sector wide organizations, for the reasons expressed above, are simply better placed to engage with government. Of course the ‘Small Advocacy’, involving non-public and direct communication with government, is less overtly ‘political’ and is a tactic which both sector wide and service organizations engage in. In Canada umbrella organizations in the settlement field are, however, also reliant on government for much of their funding resources, in some cases up to 70% from the CIC alone (information from correspondence with CIC official December 18, 2013; also see [Biles et al., 2011: 231](#)). Such funding dependence can make even umbrella organizations feel constrained in their ability to criticize state funders.

One point of tension identified in the interviews, was the erosion of trust between service agencies as a consequence of competitive contracting for government funds. “There’s also the fear of . . . the competition, of we are all fighting for the same money, so you are trying to share a common voice, but then we are trying to steal your funding at the same time” (OntNGO10). The tension arises out of the challenge of coming up with a common voice when at the same time settlement agencies are in competition with one another for the same government funding. The short-term project based funding model used in settlement services and elsewhere by government compels organizations to compete with one another for limited funds. As these funds have been cut back further as a consequence of austerity, the competition has become fiercer. This makes it difficult for agencies to cooperate on other fronts.

## 10. *Role of research (nonprofit practitioners)*

The place of research in policy advocacy was given less emphasis by service agency personnel interviewed here. In contrast, they identified networking to strengthen their influence on policymaking as their most important activity ([Evans & Wellstead, 2013, 78](#)). Service provider agencies very often simply lack the capacity to undertake their own research. As one interviewee stated, it was a rather simple reality service agencies in the sector confront: “the reality being that we have minimal [research] capacity” (BCNGO5). This is particularly true for smaller NGOs in the sector, hence their reliance on umbrella organizations to take on such roles. However, the interviews with agency respondents clearly expressed that research was still viewed as valuable, even if it was produced outside of the sector: “it is difficult for us to come up with research from our organization because we don’t have a research budget . . . so we depend on research that is done by the academics” (SKNGO2, 5). One interviewee stressed the importance for the sector to develop an “evidence based advocacy” approach in exercising their policy voice role: “it’s incumbent on civil society to not fall into the trap of just sort of using opinion and rhetoric, that it is important to have . . . evidence based advocacy” (OntNGO8). There was broad recognition of the value that government places on interventions on policy issues that are informed by strong research. It was equally clear that many agencies recognized and lamented their lack of capacity to be more effective in this regard: “We would wish to have more money for research that we could engage with” (BCNGO3). It is significant that it is only the Quebec Government that provides direct funding to NGOs to do research and advocacy so that they can “carry out social action for purposes of change” ([OCASI & CISSA, 2014: 15](#)). Other levels of government have been called upon to adopt funding reforms which would support the enhancement of the sector’s research and voice capacities to more effectively engage with government ([Burstein, 2010: 2–3](#)).

An interesting and important development within the nonprofit sector regarding the research dimension is how many nonprofit organizations have developed links to university research and researchers. The vast majority of the interviewed nonprofit informants indicated that their organizations made active use of university research work that helped inform their advocacy with government. As one informant stated: “We’re able to access that research [academic collaboration with Metropolis researchers looking at resettled refugees] to help us in the formulation or input of policy development related work” (BCNGO2).

Moreover, a good number of these organizations have actually joined with academic researchers to conduct their own studies. The work of Metropolis Canada and its regionally based centers of excellence on immigration and settlement was especially singled out as an important source of relevant research and a focal point for nonprofit–academic research partnerships. The Metropolis network composed of immigration scholars and government policy

and NGO settlement practitioners has been important for deepening the connections between the sectors (Shields & Evans, 2012).

The value of university research to the sector is significant. The view of one Saskatchewan respondent is equally representative of views held across provinces: “If there is a possibility to connect with the university so that we can give more credibility to the research we will do that” (SASKNGO3). The benefits to service agencies in the sector are multi-fold. First, given the limited independent research capacity, the ability to make use of existing research and to even partner with academics for targeted studies works to enable service agencies to bring research into their voice role and augmenting their limited capacity. Second, by connecting to university research agencies are acknowledging that their interventions with government are enhanced by adding a stronger research dimension. And finally, by linking with university research, agencies are able to better position themselves in an effort to enhance the validity and effectiveness of their voice in government. In terms of validity of voice this is enhanced because the university connection counter balances, at least to some degree, the idea often held in government that nonprofit views are not well informed by evidence and are value charged and self-interested. Consequently, the interest on the part of agencies to connect with university researchers has become increasingly important.

## 11. Concluding observations

Interviewed public servants and NGO personal report that consulting with non-government agencies, like the NGOs themselves, play a rather constrained role in the formulation of public policy in immigrant settlement services. The experience of settlement services NGOs suggests that policy consultation with government results in only very limited possibilities to influence policy. In the NGO view, most decisions have already been made prior to their becoming engaged in the process. Nonetheless, all sides still see value in NGO-government consultation as it keeps lines of communication open, government policy officials receive important information on newcomer communities and their settlement and integration, and NGOs can have important impacts in shaping program design and delivery at the operational level.

NGOs recognize that the policy process is inherently political in nature. In fact it is this political character which makes the exercise of NGO voice in the public arena highly problematic. Since settlement sector NGOs are dependent on government funding for program delivery NGOs are very hesitant to bite the hand that funds them. The restructuring of government financial support for settlement agencies into a competitive contract funding model guided by NPM axioms has stripped away much NGO capacity to make independent decisions with respect to spending. Nonprofit bodies too often come to be seen as ‘special interest’ organizations and government consultations with the NGO sector are often hollowed out as a consequence. The cold hand of advocacy chill remains very evident among settlement sector organizations.

While developments, such as the weakening of government policy capacity and the hesitant and limited take up of NPG ideas in government policy circles, has sometimes made outreach to and consultation with NGOs somewhat more desirable, the structures of neoliberal governance models remain embedded in Canadian provincial government and consequently NGO voice remains muffled. There is, however, a strong desire among nonprofit immigrant settlement organizations to amplify this voice in the service of the communities they serve. They have worked to do this by greater use of coalition advocacy through sector wide umbrella organizations and partnering with academics to bring more of an evidence-based approach to amplify their voice. These measures have been limited in their effectiveness, however, because of the enduring legacy of neoliberal governance. Service provider agencies, nonetheless, continue to value the importance of their voice role. Much of this voice is, however, expressed through the use of ‘small advocacy’ activities over more public and critical ‘big advocacy’ approaches. Nonprofit organizations have attempted to amplify their voice by adopting collective voice strategies such as the utilization of umbrella organizations for advocacy. They are also seeking to augment their research capacity by partnering with university researchers.

Both government policy workers and their agency-based counterparts recognize the value of research for evidence-informed policy advice. Settlement sector organizations remain very interested in and have made investments, even with their limited resources, in research in an effort to enhance their capacity to engage in more strategic policy interventions with government. As noted in the interviews. NGOs make use of research including qualitative evidence in their policy interventions. The use of more evidence-based advocacy interventions is also helpful in mitigating the claim that they are value charged ‘special interest’ policy interventions.

The NGO settlement sector has a policy voice which it is attempting to amplify. This effort, however, is restrained by a number of factors. This includes the enduring legacy of NPM, an austerity agenda which threatens NGO government financing, the considerable level of restructuring of the settlement service delivery, and the rapid and significant changes to immigration policy at the Federal level in Ottawa that has been bereft of consultations with the public or government and NGO stakeholders (Alboim and Cohl, 2012; Aliweiwi and Laforest, 2009).

Some opportunities exist to increase the volume and effectiveness of NGO voice in policy in immigrant settlement. There is increasing dialogue within some policy and government circles regarding the need to engage more widely and in more meaningful ways with actors in policymaking, with sub-national levels of government often leading the way. Early evidence of this can be found in forums such as the National Settlement Council and after a 10 year absence the “Vision 2020 National Settlement Conference” (2013, <http://vision.systemsinteractive.ca/>) a national conference involving multilevel stakeholders with the purpose of discussion possible future pathways to settlement programming in the context of immigration reform. The annual National Metropolis Conference is also a forum where government policy officials and NGOs are able to connect on safe neutral ground to build connections and share ideas (Shields & Evans, 2012).

It is also important to note that the grounded knowledge that nonprofit organizations hold about immigrant newcomers and their settlement and integration in Canada and in local settings means that nonprofit settlement sector organizations will remain important to the policy process. This is particularly the case at the provincial level of government given that immigration will continue to be central to regional economic development and demographic sustainability objectives and that immigrant settlement and integration occurs at the sub-national level.

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