Diversity and Immigrant Needs: Examining Toronto Through a Place-Based Approach

By Duncan MacLellan

The Study in Brief

Issue

Addressing needs of immigrants and diverse communities – using a place-based approach

Overview

Cities are increasingly important players in Canada’s political, social, and economic life. The findings offered in this paper provide a starting point in relation to policy considerations that connect diversity and growing immigrant community needs in many Canadian cities. For the purpose of this report, a place-based approach can be viewed as “the process by which people living in, or having a connection to an area try to find common ground for what the area means to them,…by seeking to realize their mutual understanding through a collaborative and consensual approach to community building and neighbourhood renewal” (Gillen, 2004, p. 208). By focusing on a place-based approach as a building block for immigrant and diverse communities, we can begin to formulate policies that recognize and promote the contributions of ethno-cultural communities to the growth and well-being of Canadian cities.

Key Findings

Some key findings in this paper include:

1) Acknowledging that some institutional arrangements at the federal, provincial, and local orders for managing the needs of immigrant and diverse communities would benefit if a place-based approach was adopted to address particular local issues.
2) The need to focus on new social and political networks that can offer innovative and consensus building solutions at the neighbourhood level in selected cities.
3) Applying a place-based approach requires careful consideration and the involvement of community leaders who are able to contribute fully to this process.
4) A place-based approach to policy-making is particularly useful for addressing immigrant settlement needs and for many of the challenges posed by increasingly diverse Canadian communities.

Methods/Approach

This paper is based on a detailed study of the institutional arrangements for addressing policy issues at the municipal order in Canada. In addition, an in-depth presentation of selected literature related to the value of a place-based approach, as a means for responding to some of the current urban challenges in many Canadian cities, forms the core of this work. The review incorporates a contemporary context within which to address current urban challenges related to immigration and diversity in urban centres.

Policy Implications

A place-based approach enables us to identify ways to assist immigrant and diverse communities within our cities in terms of policies that promote their local needs at the neighbourhood level. A place-based approach recognizes the diversity of cities and communities and proposes solutions that fit with local needs, but are within the governance structures and funding arrangements in Canada’s federal system.

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POLICY MATTERS is a series of reports focusing on key policy issues affecting immigration, diversity, integration and settlement in Canada. The goal is to provide accessible, concise information on current immigration research and its implications for policy development. POLICY MATTERS is produced by CERIS – The Ontario Metropolis Centre.
Introduction

“Cities are vital to economic prosperity... by 2020, it is estimated that 85-90% of Canada’s population will live in urban centres. Approximately 60% of GDP is generated by Canada’s 22 largest cities.” (Lopes and Poisson, 2005, p. 1)

For most of human history, wealth derived from the degree to which a place was endowed with natural resources, such as fertile soil for farming. As societies transitioned from agrarian-based society to industrial-based, manufacturing became the mainstay of economic expansion. Then as the industrial age matured, cities emerged as key sites for continued economic expansion and ensuing population growth. These factors helped to move many cities away from an industrial to a post-industrial phase focusing on a knowledge-based foundation, centred on human intelligence and creativity as essential ingredients for global city success in the 21st century (AuthentiCity, 2008; Florida, 2002).

According to recent national statistics, 64% of Canadians reside in one of Canada’s 27 census metropolitan areas (CMAs). To become a CMA, an area must register an urban core population of at least 100,000 at the previous census (Statistics Canada, 2007). While on the front line of providing basic services, municipal leaders are often sidelined in policy and financial decisions (Fowler & Siegel, 2002). Yet, cities are where today’s major public policy challenges are being played out, because the complexity of some urban problems cannot be resolved in traditional top-down methods. For example, urban health issues are often connected to: low-employment rates, limited access to early childhood education, absence of reliable educational services for adults, inadequate housing, growing environmental risks, and reduced public transit service (Hancock, 2002). Unfortunately, we often lack the fine-grained knowledge of the influence of public policies on diverse localities and populations to address these issues more fully (Bonner, 2002).

While there has been significant population growth in many CMAs, two groups are disproportionately overlooked in many Canadian cities: Aboriginals and new immigrants (External Advisory Panel on Cities and Communities, 2007; Ornstein, 2006). Many citizens within these two communities live at the margins of our biggest cities. By engaging in a place-based approach, we can begin to...
develop local capacity to build social cohesion focused on specific solutions that relate to policy and institutional structures operating at the local, provincial, and federal orders (External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities, 2006).

“Globalization can be described as a complex process embodying conditions of instant communication and the rapid movement of people, goods, and ideas.” (Hanna and Walton-Roberts 2004, p. 37)

Cities: Back on the Agenda?
Recently cities have been generating a renewed level of scholarly and political attention for some of the reasons noted above (Andrew, Graham & Phillips, 2002; Bradford, 2004, 2005; Sassen, 2001). Three factors that help account for a renewed interest in cities are: 1st) some cities have moved beyond their domestic boundaries and now occupy strategic places on the international economic stage. 2nd) the growing ethno-cultural diversity of some cities requires new approaches to solving major social problems. 3rd) the rise of new social movements has contributed to challenges to the status quo within many cities. This has led to the recognition of different types of right-based communities focused on: gender, ethno-culture, anti-poverty, and human rights that move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. Furthermore, these communities demand new social and political networks (Andrew et al., 2002).

Of the 1,110,000 newcomers who arrived in Canada from 2001-2006, 68.9% (765,000) chose to settle in the census metropolitan areas of Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver. Of the three, the largest number of newcomers settled in Toronto (447,900). The most common reason for the majority of newcomers selecting one of these three CMAs was to join the social support networks of family and friends.

“Unlike immigrants who arrived years ago in search of good farmland to till, today’s immigrants are mostly urban dwellers. In fact, they are much more likely to live in a metropolitan area than the Canadian-born population.” (Statistics Canada, 2007, p. 18)

The reason for the optimistic belief that cities are back on the agenda is that some political leaders view selected cities as “engines” that will drive the country’s economic prospects and globalization tendencies. Part of this logic stems from the notion that those cities, which have attained “global” status contain the necessary ingredients to become competitive and forceful players in a host of economic and political arenas. As cities aspire to climb higher on the global player ladder, the gap between those on the top economic rung and those near the bottom continues to widen in favour of the top groups (Hulchanski, 2007; Ornstein, 2006).

While some cities have the ability to become global players, within these cities are marginalized groups that are unable to deal with severe social problems. Only cities willing to respond effectively to these social matters will be able to become places of innovation and inclusion. (Bradford 2004)

Considering a Place-Based Approach
By recognizing place we acknowledge the importance of applying a finely-grained approach that has its roots in geographic, humanistic, anthropological, economic, social and political perspectives. A place-based approach promotes a framework that allows all stakeholders to both develop shared meanings around place, and to establish priorities for action that can help guide public policy (Nilsen, 2005; Relph, 1976). To engage local stakeholders and encourage the nurturing of interactive place-focused dialogues, Healey, (1996, 1999) supports the call for participatory democracy that
fosters collaborative and communicative dimensions.

Including place requires us to recognize and ensure that citizen needs are addressed appropriately in all stages of the policy process. Historically, politicians and planners have not reflected the needs of immigrant and diverse communities (Milroy & Wallace 2004; AuthentiCity 2008). According to Milroy and Wallace “[a]s immigration continues to change the ethnocultural mix of municipalities…inclusive participation practices are a minimum requirement for planning an ethno-racially diverse context (2004, p. 3). Therefore, examining who sits around the table when decisions are made is a first step (Milroy and Wallace, 2004). There needs to be attention directed toward networks of social relations focused on collaboratively-based, grassroots organizations that help to conceptualize and define place (Nilsen, 2005).

One of the challenges in using a term like “place” is that it can hold a variety of meanings, depending on the context within which the word is situated. Place is not a word unique to one community, it is used daily to refer to a particular building (one’s home or location), it can relate to work, to recreational activities, or to social hierarchy. This makes defining place more complex because its meaning is so familiar that it is challenging to move beyond our commonsense notion of place to consider it in a more developed manner (Cresswell, 2005).

“Embedded within the concept of place are layers of sedimented meanings derived from memory, sentiment, tradition, and identification with a spatial location” (Corcoran 2002: p. 49). In considering place, it is necessary to focus on the meanings imputed by people to their cultural and physical surroundings, and how a threat to an individual’s sense of place is also perceived as a threat to one’s self-identity (Corcoran, 2002). We usually consider community as a geographical area and/or in terms of interests that gather together based, for example, on shared experiences. As noted earlier, place is not a straightforward objectively defined term (Nilsen, 2005). Therefore place may be conceptualized not only through geography or territory but also in terms of shared experiences.

Increasingly the literature suggests that places are social constructs and that individuals help to give meaning to particular locations. Place is something that can be nurtured and reshaped through individual or collective effort. This can be extended to include intangible factors that relate to “community spirit” that imbue neighbourhood feelings. These factors may increase attachment to a particular place, and provide insight into the social relations underpinning a particular area or neighbourhood.

Generally, when we do think about place in geographical terms, it is usually related to neighbourhoods, villages, towns, and cities. The scale may vary depending on how we conceptualize our notion of place. Often we may think about it using possessive phrases such as “our” or “my” place. In this way, we narrow down our notion of place even more to be determined based on what we designate as place, involving not only geography but also social and

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psychological considerations (Cresswell, 2004). Therefore, place takes on a special meaning for immigrant communities because of the reality of the concentration of particular ethnic grouping in certain neighbourhoods. This, in turn, influences the presence of ethnic enclaves and commercial districts associated with particular immigrant communities.

A recent example of a growing ethnic enclave would be the Bangladesh community, located in Crescent Town, along Toronto’s Danforth Avenue. The presence of mosque and weekly Qu’an classes in Bengali, informal daycare facilities, Bengali language services, and expanding commercial enterprises, demonstrates the growth and vitality of this immigrant community. According to Canada’s 2006 national census, the Bangladesh community, at 24%, is now the largest visible minority group in Crescent Town, this is an increase of 6 percent from 2001 (Keung 2008). Brokerage Consultant Ashraf Ali, who moved to Crescent Town from Bangladesh over two decades ago noted ‘[n]ow we have a critical mass and we want to be more visible….We are like a banyan tree. We’ve planted our root and are continuing to grow’ (Keung, 2008, p. A10).

As the global pace of some cities quickens, due to capital mobility, mass communication, and rapid transportation, political struggles have emerged over place, specifically in relation to social movements that have organized protests to stem the tide of capital expansion in some cities. Clearly there are different and opposing voices in the discourse of place-making (residents, community organizations including ethno-racial groupings, social advocacy groups, municipal politicians, corporate strategists, urban planners, architects, etc) (Bonner, 2002). A place-based approach aims to help address and coordinate the activities of different stakeholders related to initiatives that promote social inclusion and empowerment (Nilsen, 2005).

In Britain, under the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Blair, neighbourhood regeneration became a policy area that employed a community-based, collegal approach to negotiating with key stakeholder group. (Bradford, 2004).

In Canada’s federal system, place-based thinking at the local level becomes challenging because municipalities are subordinate to their provincial master (Tindal and Tindal, 2009). In addition, cities often take on a series of different and sometimes conflicting roles that may run counter to the interests of certain stakeholder groups. Increasing demands posed by globalization have called into question traditional political approaches to decision making (Gillen, 2004; Maxwell, 2005). For these reasons, a place-based approach is complex, especially...
Many still see policies on place as essentially palliative or redistributive, simply displacing tax revenues and jobs from one locality to another, often with negative effects for national growth. ...it is essential for places to be helped to adjust when change brings unacceptable inequalities or market failures....” (External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities, 2006, p. 15)

Historically, local governments have been concerned primarily with hard services (roads, sewers, and other related infrastructure concerns) and less so with soft services (daycare, employment creation, and social services). Recently, greater demands have been placed on cities to think beyond hard services and focus on new arrangements that promote sustainable outcomes that include soft service more prominently (External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities, 2006). For this reason, place becomes more important as one descends down the economic ladder because it can reduce access to: employment opportunities, daycare, language training, settlement, and medical services. In addition, personal safety and the quality of our natural environmental are also affected by where we live (Drier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom, 2001; Toronto, 2007). Therefore, benefits would accrue from greater coordination based on horizontal relations among municipal departments and less emphasis on traditional top-down relations. As the size and importance of ethno-cultural and immigrant communities continues to expand in cities, the range of local services offered by municipal governments will need to reflect these shifts effectively (Gillen, 2004).

A new approach focused on placed-based thinking would benefit from political leadership that is less directive and more collaborative and inclusive. Tasks only get completed when players trust one another and this takes time to develop. Opportunities for developing trust should be based on social learning initiatives that stress collaboration toward understanding collective concerns (Bradford, 2005; Gillen, 2004; and Hanna and Walton-Roberts, 2005).

Engaging local communities in ways that are responsive to decision-making processes requires that these communities be equipped to revitalize themselves in accordance with their needs (Bradford, 2005; Dyck, 2003; Putnam, 2001). Providing opportunities for groups to recognize what is needed is a perplexing problem, especially at a time when some cities have become home to clusters of innovative knowledge-based industries and powerful financial sectors, while pockets within these same cities are experiencing significant poverty-related social problems and growing income polarization (AuthentiCity 2008).

Identifying and coordinating efforts within cities that are based on a ‘ground or street up’ approach, can offer opportunities to avoid overlooking immigrant and racialized communities by organizing networks and governance structures that tap directly into their local knowledge and experience (Bradford, 2004, 2005).

“Research also shows that building governance capacity requires institutions of collaboration-dedicated organizational structures to support ongoing learning and engagement among all stakeholders. Leading municipalities in Canada are moving to establish shared governance systems to support...and engage the insights of the broader community.” (AuthentiCity, 2008, p. 30)

Toronto Neighbourhoods: Looking Back and Casting Forward
Cities are complex blends of physical, social, and psychological processes which
have well-known effects on their residents’ health, education, and overall well-being. On a more local level, neighbourhoods provide access to physical infrastructure and social and community services.

Using 1970 as a baseline, from 1961-1981, there was a 20% decrease in income experienced by 13% of immigrants in Toronto; however, from 1981-2001, the 20% decrease in income was experienced by 42% of immigrants in Toronto. (Hulchanski 2007, p.7)

Over the past 30 years, the pattern of who lives in Toronto’s 527 census tracks (each contain approximately 4700 residents), on the basis of socio-economic characteristics, has changed dramatically. There has been a sharp defining of three distinct groupings of neighbourhoods based on income levels in Toronto from 1970-2000 (Hulchanski, 2007):

- The proportion of middle-income neighbourhoods had fallen from over 50% to 32%.
- The proportion of low- and very low-income neighbourhoods increased from 19% to 50%.
- The proportion of high- and very high-income neighbourhoods increased from 15% to 18%. (Hulchanski, 2007, pp-3-4)

In 1970, in general, there was more of a dispersed pattern of low-and higher-income areas across the city, and there were fewer very low-income or very high-income neighbourhoods. In addition, the low-and high-income areas were more mixed (Hulchanski, 2007).

In studying the locations of these polarized incomes within Toronto, during the past three decades, 62% of residents located in the city’s low-to-middle income sections were not born in Canada. Residing in a low-income area can affect “quality of life” measures related to specific settlement and language services that would be available for newly settled immigrants (Hulchanski, 2007).

Toronto’s growing income disparity was earlier identified in 2005, when the United Way of Greater Toronto identified 13 “priority neighbourhoods” – areas with extensive poverty but lacking social and community services. In 2007, The United Way of Greater Toronto again emphasized the continued growth in poverty in Toronto and its surrounding communities. The United Way noted that Toronto needs solutions that “fit” with what is happening in particular neighbourhoods (United Way of Greater Toronto, 2007).

“A robust place-based framework thus has two interrelated components: general policies guided by an ‘urban lens’ and targeted programs informed by the ideas of residents.” (Bradford 2005: p. v)

Tapping into a Place-Based Approach
Four points that relate to a place-based approach include:

- Drawing upon local knowledge;
- Accessing local talent individually or within community organizations;
- Finding the right policy blend; and
- Focusing on general policies mixed with targeted programs informed by local residents. (Bradford 2005)

Depending on the situation, all three orders of government may be involved in organizing a
place-based approach; however, if the policy matter is primarily local, then municipal knowledge and expertise would definitely assist in the effective implementation and evaluation of place-based strategies (Bradford, 2005).

Neighbourhood improvement strategies often confuse neighbourhood revitalization with poverty alleviation. Informed evaluations must also focus on how neighbourhood improvement affects broader goals related to affordable housing, good schools, proximity to quality jobs, and quality social services (Freiler, 2004). For these reasons, place-based policies target specific neighbourhoods or communities for integrated services that respond to the unique needs of particular places.

Bringing such a project to life will require significant challenges, new resources alone will not address the fragmented and duplicated nature of services, new structures and new mandates will require fresh thinking and greater flexibility on the part of those who fund and deliver services to Regent Park. (Toronto, 2008)

For example, the City of Toronto partnered with the two other orders of government, in 2003, to announce the start of a massive revitalization of Regent Park. Locate with Toronto’s downtown core, Regent Park has a high immigrant population; more than 60% of its residents report a first language other than English, and more than 40 languages are currently spoken in the area (Toronto, 2008). Parallel to Regent Park’s revitalization was the recognition of the need to offer a sustainable employment program tailored to the needs of Regent Park residents that “provides people with a place to start and a place to stay as it links residents to the broader opportunities of urban life” (Toronto, 2008, p. 7). The Employment Plan for Regent Park draws on place-based strategies by focusing on the following objectives:

- To enhance services to individuals to connect residents of Regent Park with employment, skills development, and educational opportunities;
- To enhance services to employers to connect residents with local employers in the Regent Park area and beyond;
- To develop a news service delivery approach to better connect services to residents and employers; and
- To build a stable, sustainable, and dynamic approach to employment and training service delivery by all orders of government, the Regent Park neighbourhood, and the broader social service network. (Toronto, 2007, p. 9)

"Much policy making for places is not about extra resources for one location or another, but about the ways in which different orders of government, communities, citizens, and business interests can find better ways to manage the places in which residents live and work." (External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities 2006, p. 17)

The emphasis on place-based policies reflects a shift from traditional top down, issue-specific policy approaches, to locally driven, comprehensive strategies. In Toronto, a place-based approach would direct attention to how residents, neighbourhood groups, and governments can find solutions to neighbourhood issues and challenges (Toronto, 2007). In terms of major policies and plans, the City of Toronto Official Plan for both 2002 and 2006, emphasized the need to develop “links to quality of place and integrate economic strategies…. (AuthentiCity, 2008, p. 8)

Conclusions
This paper has drawn together a number of perspectives related to a place-based approach for
engaging citizens from immigrant and diverse communities. To assume that all commentators are in agreement about the merits of a place-based approach would be unwise (Gillen, 2004). Further exploration of a place-based approach would benefit from the involvement of active and interested stakeholders in a variety of formal and informal, academic, practice-based, professional, and community agencies. This would enable us to consider governance frameworks that would focus on developing social and institutional capacity building initiatives that respond to local needs through the lens of a place-based approach (AuthentiCity, 2008; External Advisory Panel on Cities and Communities, 2006).

While the idea of a place-based approach is still relatively new in many Canadian jurisdictions, there is growing scholarship that supports its implementation in selected cities in the United States, Europe, and the United Kingdom. The breadth and depth of scholarship provided by Bradford (2004, 2005) and others in this expanding field, in relation to place-based research, is moving us closer toward an institutionalized form. Greater exploration, discussion, and application are needed, if the approach is to achieve an institutional form and greater policy commitment. A place-based approach would enable diverse communities to participate directly to help shape and sustain their local needs (Gillen, 2004).

This paper has observed that in exploring the literature related to a place-based approach, each order of government has a role to play that is influenced by a host of political, economic, and social factors. To begin to consider a place-making approach at the local level, it is important to recognize that there will be institutional challenges, different viewpoints, and varying priorities expressed amongst the various stakeholder groups (Bonner, 2002). These differences should not dissuade politicians, policy makers and citizens from moving toward a place-based approach. Our challenge is to develop new forms of political cooperation to cope with twenty-first century problems (Magnusson 2005).

Neighbourhoods should be healthy and inclusive places to live and raise children. They should correspond with our desire to improve the chances of success for all youth growing up in these communities, and for their families to be able to succeed and engage fully in city building at the community level (United Way, 2007). “Places and neighbourhoods become important settings for social ties, reciprocal support, and the human interactions that make us a society rather than a collection of family units “(External Advisory Community on Cities and Communities, 2006, p. 54). While Lewis Mumford acknowledges that cities will

“...[S]ignificant improvements will come only through applying art and thought to the city’s central human concerns, with a fresh dedication to the cosmic and ecological processes that enfold all being. We must restore to the city the maternal, life-nurturing functions, the autonomous activities, the symbiotic associations that have long been neglected or suppressed. For the city should be an organ of love; and the best economy of cities, is the care and culture of its citizens.” (Mumford, 1989, p. 575)
continue to be sites for future technological and electronic changes, he recognizes that cities cannot flourish if they lose sight of their core goal of providing a safe and empowering environment for all citizens.

Applying a place-based approach to unravel the complexities of urban policy making can be a daunting task; however, we would benefit from engaging community leaders to help address the growing social exclusion of many immigrant Toronto communities. We need to move away from treating immigrant communities the same, and begin to apply a place-based approach that focuses on their diverse needs in practical terms for accessing city services and programs by identifying their needs more specifically.

During the policy planning process for new initiatives, city officials and politicians would benefit from applying a place-based approach to reach out to ethno-cultural and immigrant communities, early in this process by involving them directly in these discussions. If not, the planning process becomes disconnected from the citizens it is supposed to serve. By authentically incorporating the views and opinions of immigrant and diverse communities in the day-to-day functioning of city life, we all benefit greatly from the contributions of these communities to building effective place-based policy initiatives for our cities and beyond.

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