

Volunteerism and Civic Engagement Among *New Canadians*



New Canadians have much to gain from volunteering. So what is standing in their way, and how can governments and non-profit organizations help?

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Canada leads the world in rates of immigration. In 2011, Canada admitted 249,000 permanent residents, or 0.7 percent of its population of 35 million. Canada's is among the highest immigration rate proportionally in the world and twice that of the US. One in 5 people living in Canada is now foreign-born.

Immigrants are demographically and economically vital to Canada. The employment rate for Canadian immigrants in 2012 was the third highest in the OECD, and immigrants to Canada are among the world's most educated. Immigrants add disproportionately to Canada's workforce, with 59 percent of those arriving since 2006 falling within the core working age group of 25 to 54, as compared to 42 percent of the general population. Young, skilled and employable, immigrants add significant value to Canada's economy, driving growth and competitiveness.

While economic inclusion is an important measure of immigrants' well-being, so is their engagement with the community. Manulife-funded research at the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR) suggests that social networks and civic engagement contribute as much to individuals' well-being as their income. Building connections with others fosters mutual trust and facilitates cooperative action. Newcomers, leaders, policymakers and service providers must work together across sectors to ensure immigrants have meaningful opportunities to participate in civic and community life in Canada.

Volunteering connects Canadians to their communities. In 2010, 13.3 million Canadians over the age of 15 gave their time to a cause, committing 2.1 billion total volunteer hours. Of these volunteers, 93 percent reported making a contribution to the community as their reason for volunteering. Volunteering gives Canadians the opportunity to participate in community life and to find collective solutions to shared problems.

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It can also powerfully affect personal well-being. Research shows that giving time or money to help others is associated with positive emotions and lasting improvements in mood and outlook.

CIFAR Fellow Lara Akinin, social psychologist at Simon Fraser University, suggests that

volunteering may offer an even greater happiness boost than gifts of money. “Volunteers’ connection to the people and communities they serve as well as the impact they create in the community may amplify the rewards of giving,” says Dr. Akinin. By giving their time to help others, volunteers are making a positive choice not only for their communities but also for their own well-being.

Volunteering may be especially beneficial for new Canadians, who face special challenges of establishing a career and household in a new country with access to fewer interpersonal and community resources. Social isolation is a major obstacle to immigrant well-being. Connecting new Canadians to neighbours and community organizations, volunteering increases the civic and social engagement of immigrants and enhances their capacity to face personal and economic challenges.

Although immigrants have much to gain from volunteering, they continue to do so at lower rates than other Canadians. While 49 percent of those born in Canada did some volunteer work in 2010, only 39 percent of immigrants reported doing so. This statistic is in contrast to the high rates of donation among foreign-born Canadians, who give

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slightly more than the Canadian-born on average. The volunteering gap is driven by barriers to involvement. These include immigrants' limited time and language skills, but also and perhaps more importantly, a lack of knowledge and awareness about the voluntary sector.

CIFAR Senior Fellow Irene Bloemraad, sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley, suggests that non-profit organizations and governments can do more to inform, recruit and engage new Canadians with meaningful opportunities to volunteer. “Nonprofit organizations and governments must reach out to immigrant communities in a real way, and not just expect people to walk through the door looking for services or to sign up to volunteer,” says Dr. Bloemraad.

Effective outreach must address the cultural and linguistic differences that limit immigrants' awareness and understanding of the voluntary sector. “Immigrants must be informed of services and opportunities available to them in the community in terms that make sense to them and inspire them,” says Dr. Bloemraad. In immigrant communities where assistance is typically provided through extended family networks, the very concept of an organization serving a broad section of the community may be unfamiliar. Dr. Bloemraad suggests that members of these groups are best engaged by direct, personal invitation from family, friends or neighbours.

Greater immigrant engagement with the voluntary sector will require an intensive, sustained and organized outreach effort. Networks must be built systemically over years through the dedicated work of staff and volunteers. This will only be possible with the commitment and cooperation of governments and non-profit organizations in aligning policy and resources to better inform, engage and recruit immigrants. “A vibrant and inclusive voluntary sector cannot be achieved through grassroots efforts alone, but requires investment in formal organizations with the capacity and programs to seriously engage immigrant communities,” says Dr. Bloemraad.

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