Syrian Refugee Resettlement and the Role of Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs) in Ontario, Canada

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Executive Summary

During the peak of the Syrian refugee "crisis"[i] in 2015 and early 2016, the Canadian Federal Government responded with a push to drastically increase the number of Syrian refugees it planned to resettle. The resulting Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative (SRRI) put to the test Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs), a form of place-based policy that had been in place since 2008 where communities collaborate in the support, development and execution of local immigration and refugee resettlement plans. This issue of Policy Points discusses a study of three LIPs (Hamilton, Ottawa, and Waterloo Region) and their response to the SRRI. The research provides three policy insights relevant to refugee and immigrant community resettlement. Bringing the community into the fold through multi stakeholder tables such as LIPs can coordinate local responses to the resettlement of refugees (policy insight 1). LIPs must be embedded in the local community and include leaders and personnel able to build and enhance local stakeholder networks (policy insight 2). Finally, it is key to involve LIPs in communication channels during mass resettlement events (policy insight 3). Policy action under points 2 and 3 will in turn enable LIPs to effectively support refugee resettlement at the local level. The

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experience of the three Ontario LIPs in this study is relevant to existing and potential new LIPs, but it also offers a unique place-based policy approach to engaging local communities in resettlement at other locations and scales.

Policy Context

Globally, refugee protection policies are in crisis during a period marked by increased immigration securitization, highly restricted border access and border closures, and broadening right wing populist political sentiment and action (Hyndman & Mountz, 2008). The Syrian civil war, starting in 2011, brought this crisis of the global refugee and asylum system into appalling relief (Mountz & Kempin, 2014). In the spring and summer of 2015 the world watched with increased urgency as the Mediterranean region experienced increased refugee arrivals met with inadequate international government responses.

Against this backdrop the Canadian federal election of 2015 saw the Liberal opposition party win a resounding victory on a promise to admit 25,000 Syrian refugees before the year's end—more than double of the total number of refugee arrivals in the previous year. This Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative (SRRI) ultimately resulted in Canada resettling over 40,000 Syrian refugees in four months.[ii] While the federal government and media emphasis focused on the logistics of selecting and processing refugees abroad and transporting them to Canada, the issue of their resettlement in Canada was effectively left to local stakeholders to manage. Our research examined the role of Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs), which had been created by the federal government only years prior, in the resettlement efforts of local communities in the SRRI.

What Are Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs)?

Introduced in 2008 in Ontario as part of the Canada-Ontario Immigration Agreement (COIA) and with federal government funding, LIPs are community-based councils whose main goal is to develop and implement a local resettlement strategy to produce a more welcoming community.[iii] LIPs do not provide direct services to newcomers, but rather coordinate and engage separate service providers, stakeholders, and community members to more effectively support newcomers (Esses, n.d.).

The timing of the SRRI follows a period of substantial change in Canada's resettlement policy: localization of services from federal to lower levels of government, broader emphasis on multi-sectoral partnerships, and immigrant and refugee regionalization away from metropolitan hubs to mid-sized and smaller communities. LIPs emerged in this context, where the idea of immigrant and refugee integration as a two way process had generated interest in understanding what makes a welcoming community. By Spring 2018, LIPs were still concentrated in Ontario—home to 36 LIPs, including 5 within Toronto (Pathways to Prosperity, 2017)—but the LIP network had expanded across Canada, with five LIPs in the Atlantic Provinces, fifteen in the Prairies, 19 in British Columbia, and two in Northern Canada (Northwest Territories – Yellowknife, and Yukon). The number of LIPs across Canada reached 77 in total.

LIPs were created with much promise and expectation for immigrant and refugee resettlement in Canada. Early research called them "the foundation for a new round of policy innovation that will provide better outcomes for newcomers and receiving communities while also positioning Canadian governments for continued international leadership in approaches to diversity and social sustainability" (Bradford and Andrew, 2010, 3). Common adjectives to describe LIPs have been "*living experiment*," "*social innovative policy in the making*" (Bradford and Andrew, 2011, 2), and a "*game changer*" (CIC, 2013). Immigration Minister Jason Kenney boldly stated in October 2010: "LIPs are *the future of*

settlement services" (Canada, 2011, 8). The first big test for LIPs came in 2015 with the SRRI, and the goal of this research was to evaluate, in the case of three comparable communities, how (and if) LIPs supported and improved resettlement, and what lessons they might offer for refugee resettlement policy in Canada and internationally.

Methodology

This research compared LIPs in three second-tier cities in Ontario that were official reception communities for Syrian refugees. Each community is a second tier city, had a designated Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) contract holder agency in the community (out of 6 RAP agencies total in Ontario), possessed a similar demographic profile, received similar numbers of refugees, and had established a LIP at about the same time (see Table 1 for details on three communities' characteristics). Research methods were qualitative, utilizing interviews and focus groups with key informants in each LIP and relevant municipal and settlement sector officials. Interviews were conducted about a year after the main push of the SRRI, which allowed the respondents to put the event in context and reflect on the contributions of the LIPs to the event, as well as on larger processes at work at the time. A minimum of 10 interviews were conducted in each community between October 2016 and 2017. The same methodology was applied in each community to ensure comparability of findings. Data collection was guided by five Research Questions (see Figure 1).

> ### Figure 1: Research Questions
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> **1.** *What was the level of involvement of the LIPs in the Syrian refugee resettlement process (including the LIPs role in the resettlement of the three different refugee streams: privately sponsored, government sponsored, and blended visa office referred refugees)?*
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> **2.** *How did the regional context structure the nature and extent of LIPs involvement?*
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> **3.** *How effective were the LIPs in terms of coordinating, mobilizing, communicating and managing public and immigrant and refugee serving sector responses to the resettlement process?*
>
> **4.** *What were the strengths and weaknesses of the LIP's structure in light of the Syrian refugee resettlement process, and how and why might these reflect differences in community context?*
>
> **5.** *What policy lessons can we learn from the role of the LIPs in the Syrian refugee resettlement process in these communities; what were the most effective strategies, structures and practices used and how can these lessons be scaled up nationally and even internationally?*

Aligned with data collection, a policy brief team worked to identify the key features of LIPs' local governance structures and how they might be scaled up nationally and internationally. The policy brief (p. 55), and the IMRC Policy Points report were shared with Federal policymakers in Ottawa in June 2017. The preliminary findings and policy brief were shared with research participants in the three communities at feedback sessions in April and September 2017 and March 2018. We also convened a roundtable event in March 2017 at the National Metropolis Conference in Montreal, an annual meeting where immigration and refugee practitioners, policy makers and academics gather.

Location	LIP and year of formation	Total CMA pop 2015	Immigrants as % of pop 2011	#GAR	#PSR	#BVOR
Hamilton	Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council (HIPC) 2009	771,700	24.5	982	79	16
Ottawa	Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership (OLIP/PLIO) 2009	904,905	24.5	1152	227	175
Waterloo Region	Waterloo Region Immigrant Partnership 2009 (proposal funded), 2011 (structure established)[iv]	511,300	22.3	794	138	94

Table 1: Key case study community details including census metropolitan area (CMA) population, the number of government assisted refugees (GARs), privately sponsored refugees (PSRs), and blended visa office referred refugees (BVORs). Source: CIC.

Study Findings

To summarize the role of the LIPs in the SRRI in each community:

- In Hamilton, the municipal government created a task force to coordinate the response, relying heavily on LIP members.
- In Ottawa, OLIP played an active role in providing resources and bringing together multiple stakeholders (including the City of Ottawa, settlement agencies, health care providers, education sector, etc.) by coordinating meetings among its sector tables. Based on OLIP's work, Refugee613 was created, a community initiative bringing together all interested parties in assisting with Syrian refugee resettlement.
- In the Waterloo Region, the LIP assisted in the formation of a Refugee Resettlement Steering Committee to work with municipal governments and community partners to identify, mobilize and coordinate resources to support the settlement of refugees; the steering committee oversaw the work of 11 working groups.

The research found 3 important themes common to all communities in the study. These capture the LIPs' involvement during the SRRI, and suggest the potential for LIPs to play an important role in community-based refugee resettlement policy in other contexts.

Theme 1: LIPs leverage place-based knowledge and local histories of community mobilization

The publicity around the SRRI was immense, and Canadian government resources were stretched in the processing and movement of families from overseas; meanwhile in Canada communities had to react to the issue of reception, resettlement and integration. Officials in each of the three cities engaged with the SRRI imperative by mobilizing community traditions and norms and effectively leveraging the uniqueness of place as a resource. Calling upon the community history of past actions in refugee resettlement worked as both a reassurance—'*we can do this*'—as well as a way for communities to message '*we have done this before and it worked out*.'

LIPs rose to the occasion and assisted in coordination between agencies and officials. Such cooperation was seen in retrospect as evidence that the community structures worked, and that LIPs played the coordinating role they were designed to, even if the Federal government had not necessarily activated or resourced them to do so in this instance. The resettlement push was seen as a fortuitous coming together of LIPs' previous capacity building, and community willingness to act. Working through the LIP structure, community stakeholders met the challenges of the SRRI.

Policy insight 1: **LIPs draw on local place-based strengths to secure community support to welcome refugees and reframe resettlement demands as achievable goals that express the interests of the local community.**

Theme 2: Local embeddedness and leadership of the LIPs played a role in the SRRI

How were communities able to rise to the challenge of a mass and rapid resettlement—receiving in a matter of months more than twice the average number of refugees they welcomed annually? RAP agencies in each city—the main agencies that are responsible for government-assisted refugees—risked becoming overwhelmed not only by the refugee arrivals, but also by the groundswell of community good will and interest in the process. LIPs were able to mobilize stakeholders and manage the local responses. LIPs act as community tables and act as a connector for their respective communities' resettlement stakeholders. Their strategically oriented mandate positions them well to offer vision and leadership for coordinated action among all local immigrant and refugee service providers.

Our interviews suggest that LIPs leadership fostered connectivity among community stakeholders and was key to mobilizing the right people and networks to secure effective refugee resettlement. LIP leaders and stakeholders were seen as embedded, to varying degrees, in already existing local decision making structures that were needed to meet the demands of the SRRI. In each of the three study communities LIPs played a key role in coordinating responses, collaborating with the refugee resettlement, health, education and other service sectors. In each community the LIPs formed a key part of the infrastructure that was rapidly mobilized to meet SRRI demands.

While in some cases LIPs quickly moved ahead in response to the expectation of their community, in other communities they realised they were not as well positioned as they needed to be, and found themselves unsure of their role during the SRRI. In the latter settings there were various degrees of overlap and duplication evident in resettlement services and activities, which can be seen as a result of insufficient coordination across stakeholders. However, all three communities felt they had learnt a great deal about effectively managing mass refugee resettlement events, and felt they had built stronger service and response networks as a consequence of the SRRI.

Policy insight 2: **LIPs can effectively coordinate local responses to mass refugee resettlement needs, and enhance community-wide refugee resettlement management and communication structures.**

Theme 3: Intergovernmental communication, including LIPs, IRCC, RAPs and tri-governmental relations (federal-provincial-municipal).

In Canada, immigration selection is mainly under the purview of the federal government (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada or IRCC), with settlement a shared federal and provincial responsibility,[v] and municipalities and other local stakeholders are involved as partners as needed (IRCC, 2017). At the local level, IRCC contracts 36 service provider agencies (Ontario, 2018) to meet the initial needs of refugees through Resettlement Assistance Program holders—the RAP agencies. Our data showed that the initial phase of the SRRI was marked by a lack of clear communication between the three levels of government, and between IRCC and various community actors outside of the RAPs. In reaching local stakeholders in the three communities we studied, IRCC relied on communication lines with Mayors and RAP contractor agencies (who mostly dealt with government assisted refugees), although interviews indicated that RAP agencies felt they also did not have full information, particularly about private refugee sponsorship holders.

LIPs had never been part of a large scale resettlement initiative before. They were typically left out of established federal and provincial communication channels, especially at the beginning of the SRRI. LIPs received information from RAP agencies, Local Health Integration Networks and various municipal stakeholders in some communities, but this was limited by the strain on RAPs' capacity during the SRRI, and by the extent to which each LIP was connected (or not) with RAP stakeholders. Our data suggests that the constrained access to the information about Syrian refugee arrivals, local private sponsorship holders, etc., as well as a lack of clear direction from federal government agencies, limited the LIPs' ability to fully contribute during the SRRI.

Policy learning did occur on the part of both IRCC and the LIPs. By the end of the first wave of the SRRI LIP actors in our study acknowledged they had a much stronger sense of their role, how effective they could be, and how valuable a local immigration partnership of the nature they had was. On the federal level, after operational and public pressure of peak Syrian refugee arrivals had tapered off, IRCC connected with LIPs to assess the role they had played in the process.

Policy insight 3: **Embedding LIPs in existing inter-governmental networks related to immigration and refugee resettlement policy will enable better coordinated and cohesive local resettlement.**

Resources

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[i] Globally refugee and asylum policy has shifted from "legal imperatives to protect to political climates to exclude" (Hyndman and Mountz, 2008, 268). In 2015 this fallout of international refugee protections manifested in a public and tragic setting, as the Mediterranean region experienced increased refugee arrivals and sea crossings to Europe (the single country generating most refugees being Syria (Clayton and Holland, 2015; UNHCR, 2015)), that were met in receiving countries with increased immigration securitization, border closures, and populist right wing political backlash.

[ii] Between November 4, 2015 and February 29, 2016 (approximately 4 months), total 40,081 Syrian refugees were resettled in Canada, including 25,807 who received full or partial government sponsorship (government sponsored and blended visa office referred categories) (Government of Canada, 2017). After that, resettlement of Syrian refugees continued, reaching the total of 51,240 people by January 31, 2018 (Government of Canada, 2018).

[iii] Although often used in vague contexts (Esses et al., 2010), the term welcoming community became popular in the 1990's and is commonly understood "as a location that has the capacity to meet the needs and promote the inclusion of newcomers and ensure the machinery is in place to produce and support these capacities" (Esses et al., 2010, 9).

[iv] The Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership was funded and officially began planning in 2009, and its structural elements (Council and Pillar Groups: Settle, Work, and Belong) were established in 2011 (Immigration Partnership, n/d).

[v] The province of Québec differs from the other provinces in that it has more autonomy in the areas of immigration policy and settlement programming that was granted through the Canada-Québec Accord in 1991 to better respond to its needs as a francophone society.