

Settlement 3.0 Situational Interview Themes

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Summary

This report is based on interviews with 29 people representing smaller, rural, and remote centre newcomer Service Provider Organizations (SPOs) in Yukon Territory, Northwest Territory, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. Throughout this report “smaller centres” is used to refer generally to smaller, rural, and/or remote SPOs. In unique circumstances where an example or perspective is unique to one or more of these centres it is specifically used.

Key themes from interviews

- Smaller, rural, and remote centres are resilient, creative, innovative, focused on their clients (neighbours), and committed to their communities.
- Innovation is in the DNA of smaller centre organizations.

- Being client centred is an embedded and natural part of the culture, reality, and an outcome of geography and client diversity.
- Smaller SPOs serve everyone from every immigration status to varying degrees. The importance of international students and TFWs to many small centre economies, coupled with increasing paths to permanent residence status and the ongoing need for newcomer retention in these communities suggests that expanding service eligibility is not a nice to have, but a must have.
- There cannot be replication of promising practices without customization.
- Knowledge transfer requires time, space, and resources.
- Collaboration, like innovation and being client centred comes naturally to smaller centres as a reflex of their geography and culture
- More agile and flexible funding arrangements coupled with better program officer relationships are key conditions to ensure the natural innovation in SPOs can be more formally operationalized. The experience of the pandemic should be evaluated and built upon.
- Technology is both essential and a challenge. While SPOs have figured out when it works, why it doesn't, and how to make it work, long-term resources are required. Technology is not an administrative cost, it is core to program delivery and must be reflected as such in funding and program planning.
- Interventions that are customized for smaller centre realities are already showing results. The Atlantic Pilot and municipal pilots that centre immigration with local settlement have already [shown greater retention results](#).

Recommendations

These interviews confirmed the themes and recommendations that emerged from the Settlement 2.0 report. There are nuances related to smaller SPOs in rural and smaller centres that add to those recommendations for this project.

1. In spite of the pandemic fostering a more positive relationship between IRCC Program Officers and SPOs, more work needs to be done to operationalize the Program Reset and CORE Principles and foster a better working relationship between the sector and IRCC. Open communication between the sector and IRCC to build on the progress on trust made during the pandemic needs to be formalized and operationalized.

2. Effective knowledge mobilization continues to be required. It must be implemented taking specific nuances into account, in particular smaller and rural centres. These SPOs are not able to easily replicate or adapt good ideas in settlement from larger urban centres. They also do not have enough time to document and share their own good ideas which could be replicated by other SPOs. Knowledge transfer requires time, space, and resources. There cannot be replication of promising practices without customization.
3. Baseline technology infrastructure and training/Professional Development needs to be established, with smaller centre nuances in mind. In particular, smaller SPOs are unlikely to receive investments to hire IT human resources. Technology is both essential and a challenge. While SPOs have figured out when it works, why it doesn't, and how to make it work, long-term resources are required. Technology is not an administrative cost, it is core to program delivery and must be reflected as such in funding and program planning. Some regional models of support or resource sharing should be considered. The NBMC regional network model could be looked at as a promising practice that should be evaluated with this in mind.
4. More agile and flexible funding arrangements coupled with better program officer relationships are key conditions to ensure the natural innovation in SPOs can be more formally operationalized. The experience of the pandemic should be evaluated and built upon.
5. Smaller SPOs serve everyone from every immigration status to varying degrees. The importance of international students and TFWs to many small centre economies, coupled with increasing paths to permanent residence status and the ongoing need for newcomer retention in these communities suggests that expanding service eligibility is not a nice to have, but a must have.

Definition of innovation

The proposed definition of innovation for Settlement 3.0 resonates with all interviewees. In particular, some commented that they like the distinction between innovation and iteration and that it is simply a distinction, not a judgement that one is better than the other.

Feedback from many interviewees is to not overcomplicate the notion of innovation. Many appreciated and found the distinction between innovation and iteration interesting and useful.

Reflecting on interviewee responses, during the pandemic agencies would certainly feel that they were innovating. They were creating something genuinely new. It was genuinely new to many of them to offer online services and to use technology more fully in service delivery. As well, in many cases they were more actively dealing with digital literacy and digital divide issues amongst their clients. Even though the digital divide is a lived reality in most smaller centres that predates the pandemic, few agencies previously were as actively dealing with it as they are now.

However, when we look at their practices, what they were doing in most cases is iteration. They were doing what they were always doing, but working to make it better. Or, in this case, to be relevant to the conditions they faced with remote and digital only services. They were improving service access, increasing their use of technology, etc. The perception of innovation versus iteration in the sector is worth highlighting in the conversation about innovation more broadly in the sector, as well as within IRCC. Because when the sector says it's innovative, and it's creative, because it needs to be, in many cases it is iterative. It's doing more with less. It's innovating because it needs to. Whether that can be considered innovation or iteration is up for debate. However, the perception among interviewees is certainly of innovation. And that is an important distinction that needs to be part of the conversation.

As many put it, innovation is in the DNA of the sector, but especially smaller, rural, and remote SPOs. They work together to meet basic needs, with a holistic approach focused on community development and a neighbourly approach, focused on working together to help each other. Innovation in service delivery means that newcomers have someone they can count on to help. For these SPOs innovation is simply a lived reality. They must be flexible and adaptable. At any given time they may need to do something different. They need teams that think and act in this way: "if you don't have it, you find a way to make it work." They forge a think tank mentality. While they cannot be experts in everything, they have to be able to figure it out locally with the resources they have. They're always thinking of new ways of accomplishing new things when faced with new challenges.

Learning as they go is part of the nature of their work. New experiences, bringing new ideas from other places to consider what might be replicable is part of their approach. But time and space are a concern. As are rigid guidelines. SPOs do what they can and need to do within their guidelines. However, there are large grey areas in smaller centres when they are the every-service to newcomers.

Innovation also means creating a two-way settlement process and approach. For many, relationships are essential for newcomers to be successful. SPO relationships with others in the community are important starting points to help newcomers forge those relationships. Innovation also means having the mentality that SPOs and the community can learn from newcomers and the assets, knowledge, enthusiasm, and experience they bring.

It is clear that creating an innovation culture from leadership to frontline workers is both essential and challenging:

"Innovation starts with our board of directors. And we first updated the strategic plan. One of the pillars that we put in was innovation. The first thing that we picked was, we need to define what the innovation process looks like. Number two, is how do we pilot innovation? And how do we take a little bit of risk to pilot the innovation by resourcing it? And the third one was, how can we increase our financial resilience? Because if we don't have money in the bank, through social enterprises and other resources, how will we actually fund it? Then we started implementing this. The first thing is you have to bring the right people on board, otherwise nothing's going to work. The second thing is change management. So we're in that process, we've been in this process for the past year and a half. So we've unfrozen the culture. And half of our colleagues are no longer with us. We brought in new people who believe in this vision, and some people, we have upskilled. It there's been a lot of promotions as well. And there's been a few early retirements, people have said, you know, what, I don't think we belong in this culture anymore. We've made our impact."

Change and people management

Tapping into the talent that exists within SPOs and giving them the space to innovate is key:

"I've been floored by the talent and the passion of people who just really weren't being tapped into. They just did the job they were hired for and their potential really wasn't being unleashed at all. And I think that that is going to be an exciting mind shift change. Because it was very hierarchical, previously... You can't stifle progress, you have to take a risk. And when your people fail, you have to back them up. You have to tell them that I've got your back, go ahead, do it again and again and again. So when we came on board, we just pushed him, we said, go do it. I don't care how long it takes us to do it now. And so then he stepped into like sixth gear, and then delivered the app. He was never funded

for that. He was funded to be a settlement counselor. This is something he did. On the side of his desk."

Leadership is important:

"I think it goes back to the culture. If you don't have the leadership, you won't create the culture. Otherwise, innovation, you've seen it in your research, like it's a buzzword." Trust within the organization is key, both staff trusting leaders, and leaders trusting staff: "And I think that's where the trust aspect comes into play, as well as that we are able to demonstrate right away in a virtual platform, what it is that we're doing. That hierarchy definitely doesn't really exist as much. I wouldn't say it's at the forefront anymore."

That trust must extend to relationships with funders as well. As is being clear about why you're innovating:

"Innovation matters insofar as it can keep the enterprise value proposition evergreen and dynamically connected to consumers and the marketplace. Innovation, even in smaller enterprises, helps keep them nimble, farsighted and prescient in many ways. There's such a strategic advantage in a DNA that helps the company look over the next hill, espousing timely change, internally and externally."

Innovation also needs to be about creating excellence with newcomer outcomes firmly at the core:

"My key idea: being stellar. The key idea for being stellar is helping to create new contexts in which we live and work and to choose more constructive approaches to the future. This new context that we seek is one that restores community, a context of possibility, generosity and gifts rather than one of problem-solving, fear and retribution. A new context acknowledges that we have all the capacity, expertise and resources that an alternative future requires. And, that is the choice we have before us – the choice of our context. Being stellar means that we all have the capacity, expertise and resources. Accordingly, what we advocate is applying these to create a compelling future which will pay more significantly-increased dividends than moving these assets through the context of the past."

Operationalizing innovation

While many conversations about innovation meander towards technology, process innovation is as important, if not more so, than tools:

“There's some technological and digital advances that I think can help streamline service automate processes, of course, but I think there's a lot of that non digital work, which can be the face to face connection with clients, the way the collaboration, the way our decision making, and the engagement of stakeholders that will also lead to greater adaptability and agility. And, yeah, innovation can happen in leaps and bounds and create entirely new projects. But I think sometimes there's great success in that continuous fine tuning and updating of the processes that can continue making some network easier and better across the board.”

The comment “doing it on the side of our desk” comes up as frequently in interviews as it did during the Settlement 2.0 project. Interviewees agree it would be useful to build time and space for innovation into funding and program expectations; a few hours a week are allocated to learning and sharing and connecting with people in the sector:

“It involves different capacities as well, working alongside us. Understanding the challenges of the clients that we serve. There is a real need for SPOs to to be reflective on innovation, for sure. And this is definitely a goal, in my view.”

Knowledge sharing and knowledge mobilization are also key to operationalizing innovation:

“When useful tools or processes have been created in one area it would be useful to know about it, and have the time to evaluate if it could work in the local setting.”

As will be discussed below there are unique challenges and nuances for smaller centres when it comes to knowledge mobilization and replication that also need to be considered.

Smaller Centre unique needs and opportunities

The main theme of the Settlement 2.0 report, that innovation is in the sector’s DNA, is perhaps best exemplified by smaller and rural centre service providers. Simply out of necessity of a lack of human and other resources, and a community closeness with newcomers, smaller centres must be creative, innovative, and look for different ways to serve diverse populations.

In many cases, there are not major groupings of particular ethnic groups, unlike in larger urban centres, so SPOs epitomize the notion of generalists. Each client presents unique needs and situations. That's not unlike anywhere else. However, what is substantially different is that in smaller centres unique or niche programs and service providers are less common. There isn't access to as many services, limited counsellors and housing. For example, a SPO may have an employment specialist, but they must serve every type of employment situation, from regulatory bodies and recertification, to resumes, to unskilled workers, to TFWs and international students, and so on.

This creates natural innovation in services, as well as deeper connections to newcomers. Relationships with people are strong, you really get to know people, follow-up informally and see their progress, identify their challenges earlier, etc. Informal interventions are as important as formal.

There are also more compressed hierarchies in smaller centres, so SPOs have easier access to other decision-makers and in the community. This allows them to be nimble and agile, partnering with them to help newcomers, sometimes on a very specific and individual basis. SPOs can find informal mentors, connect people directly (warm referrals), better eliminate the unknown for newcomers and create a more welcoming community. SPOs can also intervene more in-person and directly if there are issues.

One challenge in smaller centres is that there are fewer specialists. Settlement workers have to be generalists. This includes services in the community. A service may be in another community so staff have to arrange transportation for clients to other cities. In some ways and with some services that can be mitigated with technology with services becoming more accessible, but not always.

This was captured in the Settlement 2.0 situational analysis, and remains consistent throughout interviews with small centre SPOs. They must be everything to everyone:

"On the one hand, skilled immigration favours professional newcomers with high language skills. On the other interviewees say that there is also need to provide services to people with many complex needs, who have suffered trauma, may not be literate online or in their own language skills. Services need to be targeted and effective for the entire range of newcomers and needs."

Further, these interviews corroborate and emphasize this previous narrative:

“According to interviewees, front-line workers identify feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and unsupported (both internally, and in interactions with other agencies). Themes of client issues, personalization, and worker well-being come up consistently in interviews and in the literature. Workers are seeing clients with more specialized needs (such as low literacy levels, larger families, more trauma, along with highly skilled professionals that continue to face labour market barriers and discrimination) requiring them to both know and be able to access a wide range of specific information and services, while also being able to address client needs in initial interactions with them (OCASI 2012). Interviewees also expressed concern around increasingly vocal negative attitudes expressed toward immigration over the past year or so.”

As one interviewee commented

“Settlement work is no longer just settlement work. When we're talking in a province like ours, where population growth is the make or break of our province, about the future for our provincial economy and in many of our public institutions and many other employers. Settlement work is also talking about housings, access to interpretation and healthcare and reimagining the mental health care system, for example. And suddenly, our workers are being pulled in a number of different directions, which allow for incredible creativity and innovation, because you started being part of all these conversations, and you're seeing linkages and like, oh, if we could create this, like this would solve this problem. But we're only funded for ABC or a certain number of tasks, it doesn't allow for that space to, even if you have the great idea to implement it, and to dedicate the time and resources to really invest yourself your time in innovation, let alone like getting the funds to bring some of these projects to life. We're just looking at what is the role of a settlement worker, and it's a settlement worker, but it's also a community connector liaison officer, a housing specialist, and mental health advisor, etc, etc. So it has evolved significantly.”

Over the past year while providing services during the pandemic these themes and challenges have been exacerbated. At the same time, SPOs indicate a commitment to their newcomer clients and communities that is perhaps stronger than ever before, in part because those communities may be more vulnerable to isolation and impacts of the pandemic. At their core, small centre and rural SPOs are stretched in terms of resources, but because they are closer to their clients, literally in every way in the community, their

commitment to them is not only as service providers, but as neighbours, fellow parents, and family surrogates.

While SPOs acknowledge that this can present challenges related to professional boundaries, it is also simply the reality of smaller centre community building and engagement:

“Before COVID we used to laugh about don't go to Walmart on a Friday night, you'll be there all night. Because you've run into all your clients. They want to talk to you about something, right? Or some in my neighborhood, don't go for a walk because they'll run out of their house, 'Hey! You know...'. Because it's not just a nine to five. You step out of your house, and you're gonna run into somebody who needs something. in a small town, somebody may text you and it's about our work, but to them, it's they're texting a friend asking the question, right. So it's hard because we stay connected to them. There's a wide swath of grey between clients and personal sometimes.”

At the same time, as newcomer needs increase, the need to expand also increases, but it is a slow moving process:

“the situation that I'm in is expansion and that desire to have more services, but not being able to do it on my own and covering such a wide area... the barriers that come with that looking for innovative practices, that other extremely rural areas have been able to access in order to support their their client base that is really off the grid. To be completely honest I don't see our community or any of the communities that I service as being innovative communities. We are very much followers. We really look for things that others have done, and then wait 10 years and then try to implement.”

Newcomers being aware of services, even in small centres, continues to be a struggle. The simple idea of being notified when a newcomer is settling in their area would not only allow SPOs to reach out to newcomers, but potentially result in better outcomes for those newcomers:

“The only way that we can make connection with them is essentially if they reach out to us. I can do presentations and things like that and of course I do and make myself known in the community generally. But ultimately, if they don't know about us, they don't know about us... All of them say to me, Well, I wish I would have known about this, when I first settled. 'You can help with health cards? Oh, I really struggled with that'. Or, you know,

'you can help me understand the deductions on my paycheck? Oh, my goodness, I made so many phone calls in the first three months, because I didn't get it.' They're really simple things like that, that 'I just wish I would have known they were here in the first weeks and first months of settling.' I think the amount of support I could have given them might have increased or sped up their settlement. And made them want to stay. We know a lot of them leave within two years of coming here."

When it comes to the notion that larger agencies might be able to serve communities through remote and digital services, there is a sense that it won't work because of the unique nuances of smaller centres:

"the previous person in the position was not originally from, from this community, she she moved in from an urban community to take this position. And with small communities, it's just, it's so much more beneficial. If it's someone who knows the community, the community knows them. I grew up here, everybody knows my name, it's a lot easier for me to make those connections a lot faster than it would have been for her."

Internet connections can be decent within core small centres (towns and small cities). However, interviewees note that this changes as they serve newcomers in outlying areas. Internet connections are unstable and slow, which impacts the ability to provide services remotely to those areas and for clients to access digital services. The phone becomes the main lifeline, and those interventions take much longer.

It's generally recognized that smaller centres have attraction and retention challenges and that solutions are being put into place. There is also a sense that they don't have an adequate seat at the immigration policy table:

"One thing that we have been advocating for is, we know that the big cities have like direct dialogue with the Minister responsible for immigration, or at least a few years ago, they did so like Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, like the big ones. But there's no regular kind of check in with mid size urban cities that have an immigration mandate. So not all cities have infrastructure, or have put together a strategy, but for cities who have, I do feel if we're going to be successful, and encourage people to be successful, and also making sure that we're addressing our demographic challenges and our economic challenges, those voices need to be at the table. Mayors need to be able to advocate on behalf of their cities."

Replication needs to be considered with customization, in particular in rural communities:

"In the past national projects may have been suggested for smaller centres, but there are unique challenges and conditions that might not be taken into account. PBLA is an example. PBLA is a great system that helps teachers and students see progress. However, it only works when there are one or 2 CLB levels present in a class at a time. In smaller centres, many newcomers with CLB levels may be in the same classroom. PBLA isn't designed for that. It was designed and tested in an urban landscape and is not a fit in smaller centres."

When it comes to replication, smaller centre SPOs tend to lack the time and space to be able to reflect on information shared and how they might use it:

"Just getting those ideas and sort of bouncing them around the room and then you get an idea of what works in what types of communities to write right? You get a better sense of whether or not something is worth trying when you have a chance to talk to people who have done it. You know, if it works in Smithers, but it doesn't work in Kamloops. And you get an idea of whether or not it's going to work here. It's causing me a lot of anxiety. Because there's so much information coming at us. And we're trying to filter through what we can use."

Getting the information in a way that is actually meaningful for them, having the space to have the in person and the informal kinds of conversations are important for replication. Most agencies are innovative, just out of necessity, but the space to operationalize innovative practice is lacking. The other side is being able to take the time to reflect on their own practice, learn from it, use it to impact their programs and services, as well as share their promising practices out to the wider sector. There is interest in being supported to create that time and space:

"Well, all of that. Because it's just, there's just three of us in the office here. We have over four hundred clients. And when we do something, somebody will say, 'Well tell us a good story.' And you think 'I don't have anything.' And then you think, 'Oh, yeah, we did that. Yeah, we did that.' But we don't think of it at the time as something extraordinary. We just do it. And then we do the next thing. So it's hard to sit down and think, 'yeah, we're actually doing that.'"

There doesn't seem to be a sense that IRCC's CORE Principles or the Program Reset approach are being formally operationalized within IRCC yet, as one IRCC representative said:

"it's brought up in terms of we need to keep the client at the center, but it's not. I don't necessarily hear it in ongoing conversations. And with reset, what I have found is that it's its dialogue that's kind of interspersed within conversations... but I don't really find that's ongoing. It's more bits and pieces kind of thrown in."

Another IRCC representative suggested that the Program Reset conversation continues with the sector. However, it is somewhat overshadowed by small incremental innovations such as digital/electronic signatures have been quick technology wins, but are not being accomplished within a broader framework.

The relationship with and support from IRCC

Information flowing up but not back down is a common concern among SPOs. They report statistics, submit narrative reports, and program evaluations, but little knowledge transfer and mobilization occurs formally in the sector. There is also a challenge that if that information flow was to be turned on, that SPOs are overwhelmed already and would need to have the information tailored to their needs and unique situations, as previously discussed.

And while the rhetoric of innovation and transformation is being discussed, it is still difficult to operationalize in the sector:

"I think when I reflect back on the past five to six months, like it's not a small undertaking this organizational transformation, you know, which we're really calling transition, because I think transformation broadly gets funders nervous. But really, a lot of what my focus has been is looking at how we are taking something from an idea to actually understanding its impact, broadly, versus funder based, because what was really obvious when I first came into the organization. I felt like I was constantly asking questions. So why do we do that? Why are we involved in this? Or why do we have such and such a program? I don't see how this fits in terms of an overall vision and mission. And so it's been really exciting to see and go through because we're kind of actively going through it. This concept of how do we change the organization to really align with the star strategy of unleashing the social, economic and civil potential of new commerce?"

Interviewees confirmed the Settlement 2.0 finding that new roles are emerging, but lack funding:

“Funders are not investing in roles like mine, or other types of roles and change management type support that you need, in order to have sustained innovation in an organization. And I think what some are doing with social bonds and social enterprise, it's the innovative thinking to increase your unrestricted dollars and decrease your reliance on funders. Government is still a key partner that's not critical to your work, but that I think that's what really seems to be required.”

Some interviewees echoed a common theme in the sector around the lack of data analysis. In spite of data being collected about clients and shared with IRCC

“there's not a lot of good, particularly good local data around immigrants. Service providers have very good data about their clients and about the services, the programs, all those things. They have excellent data. But there is no no data about where people are leaving, where people are moving. Why? You didn't really need people who do that, to analyze the data. People working in the sector are suddenly expected to become researchers, on top of everything else they are. So they have to do a lot of research that they may not be necessarily suited to do or that takes a big chunk of their time. Time that usually is not compensated for and we should have actual researchers look at a local level. IRCC does great work, but they do great work at the national level. But when you add these local levels and the LIPs sometimes we are talking about very different things, even when we're having the same conversation. And those very different things are coming from the fact that we have either very different experiences, we know different people, or we have different data. And the data is easier, to some extent. When we go to Okay, here's the provincial data and that's not changing here. There's the numbers of but when we try to go more granular, it becomes anecdotal and then it depends on your experience and who you know, etc. Many of our conversations, many of our discussions are based on that. And that's, that's really not helpful when you're trying to put voices together and you're trying to prioritize needs. And your conversation varies depending on your experience, depending on who you're talking to, like. We need at least that baseline. And because we don't have that baseline. It is sometimes very difficult to put all those voices together. And to respond adequately to the needs of or to the concerns that are raised and voiced. We hear some things from the community, we try to take those things from the community to our tables, and then our tables, depending on that experience

may end up in a rabbit hole, then, three months or four months later, here's our response to that question that came and was actually kind of urgent at the time."

Being responsive to client needs is central to small centre service culture. And it can be frustrating when they are constrained or unable to respond as quickly or adequately as they want to.

There is also a lack of consistency around leadership in innovation from IRCC. From one SPO:

"we talked about innovation sector, so leadership is required. But what about the bureaucracy? What about the IRCC? Even within those departments, we have distinct styles. Some leaders talk about innovation, disruption and all this kind of stuff. But what about the program officer level? Are they also doing that? What about the other groups? Like other departments within IRCC? Are they involved in that as well? What I've learned and picked up is that there's a view from the outside periphery, within the bureaucracy, or there's a view from the inside out. So I think, what about IRCC's view? And can we create a Human Design Center in the sector?"

This inconsistency was evident in conversations with IRCC, where the sector is seen by some as lacking an innovation mindset:

"I find that a lot of the settlement sector is very insular. I find they don't like to go outside to see if something's already being done or to learn from others. What I have found over my time is that often settlement organizations say, 'our population has identified a need, we need to create a program to meet the need, or we need to create an information session.' But number one, they might not be the experts. Number two, maybe someone's already doing it. So I find that the landscape is really competitive. And I know part of it is our funding, but in a way they shouldn't be competitive. The organizations should be working together. Because the end goal is the same, it's to help the newcomers become established. And I think they lose sight of that in the quest for self preservation. They want to keep their own jobs, they want to keep the same level of funding. But I see a lot of ways that innovation could happen. But I think people are stuck in mindsets. And also, in some cases, some of the leadership, maybe their experience is a bit limited. You know, if you work in the same place for 20-25 years, and you've never worked anywhere else, and everyone you've worked with has always worked in Settlement. Your ideas are pretty limited."

Another indicated:

"It's hard for our officers to sort of find time in their day to do that, because we're so bogged down with the money and budgets and the activities and the schedules and the reporting. Maybe when our officers hear about innovation from the sector, it doesn't register with them as something that they should be pushing up or encouraging, because they're so bogged down with the day-to-day. So we've been, I think, on our side trying to understand the importance of innovation, and that we should be looking for that and encouraging it. If you're hearing about it with the SPOs, sometimes you might think, 'oh, that's gonna be too expensive, or that's not where we're supposed to be doing.' That's not how it works, that maybe it's getting killed at that level of the relationship."

This duality of IRCC Program Officers as advocates and auditors came up as a potential impediment to creating this innovation culture and operationalizing it:

"Program officers have a tough job, because they're sort of doing both. They're advocating for their organizations. We have different procedures in our region where when there's an amendment request, we bring it to a committee, and you've got to kind of argue for your SPO's amendment request. That's a job we're doing, we're advocating for our SPOs, we're trying to promote them and get the money and the resources that they're going to need. But on the other side, we're also monitoring them and keeping tabs and making sure they're following the rules. A contribution agreement is not a grant, and we've got some pretty heavy reporting requirements. So it's hard to sort of balance those two things, for sure. I think it's not an easy job. And we do have a lot of turnover and the officer role and some people love this kind of job, but it's not not super easy. And it's not for everyone."

At the same time, the sector and IRCC have worked closely together to create a new case management system in the PNT Region (which will be covered in more detail in the Promising Practices section):

"The case management cluster is an awesome example of it working. That cluster has been around since the beginning. And they've come up with a case management triage model, different levels of case management, collectively deciding what kinds of qualifications should serve certain clients that present at certain levels. So that's a real example of, I guess, collaboration and innovation."

The cluster model in PNT is an example “where officers and people from the sector will get together to talk about the issues, and to mean to plan events, to go through learning and talk about innovation.”

At the same time, there is still work to be done in operationalizing innovation within IRCC and among SPOs, lacking a sense of how to do it effectively:

“So those are good, but we always kind of end up they fall off the side of our desk because we don't have enough time for them. I wonder, we do have kind of have these positions in PNT, we call them issues management roles and we've got one for official languages, we've got a couple for different different topics. But kind of in the way that a LIP coordinator for a local immigration partnership is there to basically push the issue forward and be that person who's going to schedule the meetings, pull together the action plan, you need somebody who's driving it forward. So I don't know if maybe we need somebody within IRCC, or within the sector, who's going to plan these meetings, make sure that we're taking the time, forcing us into it. If there's someone who's only job is to make sure that we're all innovating properly, do we need a LIP coordinator type person to be pushing those things forward?”

With these disconnects, one SPO outlines the growth of administrative inefficiencies, in particular duplication in reporting:

“I think administrative reporting could be reduced. I find that there's a lot of duplication between, you know, if I send a report to my immigration officer, I'm being asked for the exact same information that I've just loaded up into iCARE. So what's the point of that? We just copy paste it, and then expand on it a little bit in different ways. But why report everything out into one system? And then I find out that very often, you know, the person that's responsible for us doesn't even have access to some of that reporting, because that goes to a different department within IRCC. And then they don't talk to each other. I think if one of their big worries is how do we reduce administrative expenses, maybe have a look at how much administrative requirements there are to actually deliver these programs?”

There also seems to be a sense from at least one IRCC representative of a communications disconnect between IRCC and SPOs:

"I would love for them to fully understand what we can fund them for and what they should be delivering. If they want to go and do the extra mile fine, but find funding elsewhere for it because our funding is finite." As well, there is a sense that SPOs are not future focused or thinking about future program or funding possibilities: "I'd like organizations to think ahead, we're already thinking ahead to 2024. I get the feeling they are not and won't be until 2024 when the call goes out. And then they need to think, okay, crap, I need to put something in the application. What do I put in there? They should plan ahead now. And in years, where we find that we might have some extra money, do some experiments and try something new, like this year, we have so much money, we can't spend it. So because of COVID. But it's a good time to try something."

There is also a concern that not all sector voices are heard at IRCC. As one SPO said:

"I'm really not sure that the small centers have a good voice at that table. They get drowned out by the louder voices of larger organizations."

Another agrees:

"It seems like the big agencies in [larger urban centres] drive a lot of the agenda. And, you know, I think that agencies like ours are very often dependent on being a subcontractor in certain programs to a larger agency. I'm not sure that that is necessarily the best approach sometimes. Now, if you do an inter regional type of approach where let's go back to our region and say there's a RAP program. So rather than having it delivered through one of the larger city agencies, why not look at a regional approach and say, okay you five local organizations get together. And you're gonna work together on this RAP program. And depending on what your capacity is within your regions, let's say I have two spaces available in my community that are affordable housing and there's three coming in, then I can get on the horn with other communities and say, Hey, if you want, I can take two of them, we've got something set up for them. I don't think a larger organization fully understands some of the pinch points here in our region. So I think it's a little bit of a separation. We need to look at it more from that kind of a regional approach."

The client is centred

The notion that clients are not central to SPOs is a misperception and a myth. In conversation after conversation, in Settlement 2.0 and now, SPO representatives speak

eloquently about their commitment to clients, and how they go the extra mile to meet their needs.

What is clear is that there are times when this is less feasible because while immigration and settlement require agility, funding structures and funding relationships remain rigid, mired in an audit mentality, and inconsistent between jurisdictions, types of funding, and between IRCC program officers. However, the pandemic has provided a unique set of circumstances where these structures and mentality has had to shift from audit to support. Interviewees speak of conversations with program officers that focus on how they can help agencies during an extraordinary time rather than constricting their agility and ability to meet client needs.

It is important to note that some of this funded agility will be coming to an end on March 31st and it is not clear if some of the unique supports, funded roles, device supports, and other tangible differences in the relationship between the sector and its biggest funder will remain temporary or be supported as the need continues to exist.

Without a whole community approach to settlement and inclusion small centres simply are not able to retain newcomers. This means SPOs must ensure connections with other actors in the community, including employers, to ensure that newcomers and their unique assets and challenges are taken into account. Because of compressed hierarchies in smaller centres, SPOs are actively able to reach decision-makers and key actors and tailor solutions with them. For SPOs this means getting to know clients deeply, individually (or families) and tailoring solutions to their needs. This is part of the unique culture in smaller centres, but also takes more time and requires constant learning and creativity to meet unique situations.

At the same time, there are pressures that result in a lack of client centric behaviour:

“And so one of the early things I'm trying to do is to just even understand some of the data that we collect. We've got a lot of stuff internally that's required from the federal government, the provincial government, and then there's these reports that are spit out. It's very, it's a very rote process. So there's not a lot of thinking like critical thinking or application of that knowledge to inform the work that we do. So I think if there's going to be a bit of a phased approach to make sure that we're looking at, what do we already know? And then what are the other questions that we have and finding an opportunity for? Honestly, the focus immediately is a lot on operations and efficiency. So how can we

change the work that we're doing to actually reach more people effectively and provide better quality customer service?"

For smaller centres, being client centric is a natural outcome of their circumstances: "the community wraparound is our strength. Trust is essential, especially for people coming from places of low trust. It's a real shift when they know they can trust community and services, including trusting referrals - see responsiveness from service providers - always willing and able to adapt and meet the needs that emerge"

Centering frontline workers also needs to be part of the process:

"So starting with the long term client study and project impact, we've had frontline workers being an integral part of that process, being part of interviews and focus groups. Frontline and managerial staff have been part of that design and development. And so now that they're the ones telling us what it needs to do."

According to some, the way systems and programs are constructed gets in the way of being client centric, which is typically what frontline workers want to be focused on, but don't feel they can be. The audit and fraud mindset comes from funder down to the frontline worker and becomes part of the culture:

"Part of what we've done is like, I think we've we've, you know, allowed some of the the empathetic energy that social workers have to calcify, right by saying like, Oh, you must assess their eligibility, right? You have to ensure that this isn't being abused, because you're a gatekeeper to this program. Right and that that mindset is imbued, right? Like I'm a gatekeeper for this to prevent abuse. Rather than I'm here to help someone achieve goals, and you know, I'm here to help them achieve goals, then I may suggest this program may not. Right? And, you know, you might still get the same answers like, Okay, this is a program for people with a certain income level. But you don't start out with that you start out with like, What's your goal? How can I help you? It's like, oh, okay, so your goal is housing. Maybe your goal isn't food security, and so I'm not actually going to help you with that. I'm gonna help you with the thing you care about."

Being client centric also means serving everyone in the community. The notion of who can access services and when is part of the discussion.

From an IRCC perspective, there is still a lingering question about how to measure outcomes:

"How do you measure that settlement is done? And I'd really like to see progression measured somehow. It's not really measured. So like for language classes. We know that the seats are falling, we know people are coming. What we don't know right now. And I think we're turning our mind towards it by looking at the cohort, what's the graduation rate? What do they go on to become? And? Or is it the same people in level one for three years straight? Right. And because then we could go further? and think, is there a different way of programming that might help those people that are stuck at level one for three years? Maybe formal language classes aren't working for them, but maybe there's another way of teaching the language?"

One SPO indicated that they have added questions about technology and digital literacy in their intake process for some time, but lack the capacity to analyze the data:

"Quite frankly, my staff wasn't prepared. Funders weren't prepared. clients were not prepared for it. It's frustrating, because I know where we need to be, but I can't get us there. Number one is building capacity and people. So that requires first building a proper assessment to figure out where people are, and where they're not. So allowing us the time to do that, build that, determining what those criteria would be to assess technological literacy, whatever that means. The second part is to assess our ability, technologically, what capacity do we have currently with our technological means or resources? And then I think the other thing is to really clearly understand the challenges in rural communities in the amount of support required to do this, it requires an outreach person. There should always be somebody on the ground that's supporting them, because it's not just about the technology support. Its supporting them in their real lives and understanding and advocating things that we say that we do all the time."

Measuring impact, including during COVID remains a struggle, but there is a sense that IRCC and SPOs need to work together to figure it out. IRCC representatives indicate they are looking for more structured reporting on outcomes of service interactions with newcomers in order to better assess programming impact and new programming needs. One IRCC representative wondered if SPOs are as client-centric as they could be:

"They're competing for funding. I think that in itself puts a different perspective on it for them. They're saying, this is my specialty, this is what clients need, and I can deliver it and

I can do it best. Whereas if we took a more client centric approach, whereas we asked the clients what they need, instead of asking the SPOs what they think the client needs. I don't I don't know that there's a giant disconnect. But I think in the world of competitive funding, the SPOs tell us what they think we want to hear. Whereas I think we need to be focusing on the client and seeing what the client thinks they need and maybe the SPOs are right, in some cases, but there's a good chance they're not. There's a good chance that there's things we're missing, and the SPOs may not know or they know and then they don't know the specialty so they don't raise it."

They further suggested that IRCC should take on consultations with newcomers to determine needs:

"I think IRCC needs to be the one to ask the clients what they think they need, whether it's a newcomer survey, or a longitudinal study of the journey, and then identify pain points along the way where you could have had an intervention, which would have helped the client better integrate."

There is a sense from one IRCC representative that digital tools and data could better help centre the client:

"If we were to digitize or have a way to track our clients, right from arrival, or pre arrival, really, all the way to naturalization, we would get a much better picture of what our client's needs are, as opposed to what our SPOs are telling us what their needs are. I think we need to really push that because then we could make better funding decisions. Because right now, from what I see, we fund what the SPOs tell us the gaps are. And I know that there's every once in a while there's like an expression of interest, or CFP, when, when we know there's a gap. But I think there needs to be more analysis from the IRCC side in terms of where the gaps actually are from the clients' perspectives as well. I don't know what work is being done from that lens in terms of when clients land. Is there any point along that journey where someone says to them, what do you actually need in order to help your integration process? I think there's got to be an innovative way to find that in the world of digitization. We're moving so many of our services online, how can we capture the data that we actually need in order to make good funding decisions?"

Another said:

“Something that's always come up is the transfer between pre arrival services, and services once newcomers get into Canada. And then even if there's a secondary migration, where people are moving from an urban center to a small center, wouldn't it be great if you had that settlement plan, and it could follow a newcomer and you could just click a box online, and you go from pre arrival to you move to Winnipeg, and then you end up in Brandon, Manitoba? And you've done all this work to have your needs assessed and your assets assessed and [the system suggests] what referrals you need? Why can't that settlement plan follow you wherever you go?”

In Settlement 2.0 we found that both the sector and IRCC were waiting for each other to define and operationalize innovation. It appears that there is a similar “wait and see” approach occurring when it comes to outcomes measurement and data use/analysis:

“IRCC, is hoping that the sector comes to us and says, Oh, look at this really innovative, innovative way that we've come up with for tracking our outcomes. And maybe it's, you know, it's not client numbers, but we've divided this is a great way. And I think maybe the sector is kind of waiting for us to say, this is how we want you to be tracking your outcomes. But I mean, we're, I think we're open to innovation in the reporting piece, and the tracking of outcomes and measuring success. Like if they can tell us how, how they think is best to measure or how their program is going. Because we sometimes don't have a clue ourselves.”

Eligibility requirements

Smaller centres in British Columbia, in particular, have had historical experience serving TFWs and international students and indicate the importance of continuing to be able to support them. As Canada's immigration system increasingly creates stronger and quicker pathways to permanent residency for those with temporary status, it simply makes sense to support these newcomers even while they are considered temporary.

In a number of cases TFWs and international students make up large numbers. In one case an interviewee discussed how siloed approaches to how newcomers are served can result in larger resource and access issues in the community.

Regardless of their capacity or funded permission to serve these groups, smaller centre SPOs faced with these challenges work towards collaborative solutions in their communities:

“So start with just information sharing. For instance, as you know, colleges and universities across the whole country are bringing in international students. Even in our small community, we do have issues with housing, and the costs are going up and it's a very limited market. In just a few years the college went from a handful to about 50. And now all of a sudden, there's 300. And nobody knows anything. The city council doesn't know so the planning hasn't really happened. The college is doing their thing. The information doesn't flow. That's just one example of the need for community planning. How can we support the people because especially international students, right, they can do such a great job, then promote, you know, staying in the community or promoting retention? Or, you know, any workers, and anybody who's coming in, so that's just one example. I was invited to a meeting, and I shared with the counselor, and they had no idea, nobody knows about this, and how are we going to find places to live for 300? The college has some dorms, but not enough. Those are just small things that not if we just start with information sharing, and then we go from there.”

SPOs cultivate these community connections in order to have impact and improve newcomer outcomes. They are interested in learning how others have done what they are doing, have many practices that might be shared, but as was mentioned in the Smaller Centre section, lack the capacity to effectively engage with promising practices.

Promising practices

While geography and technology can be a challenge, SPOs feel they have few boundaries in place for newcomers to access their services and help. SPOs go to where clients are and meet them in the community. At the same time, agencies become community hubs (in places where they were deemed essential services and allowed to remain open). This was particularly emphasized during the pandemic when many had struggles with the digital divide (high internet costs, lack of devices). Newcomer youth were able to access school from devices in the agency and SPOs also provided space for social interactions, creating client bubbles and bringing social interactions into their space. Agencies moved online quickly when doors closed during the pandemic. When clients were not always able to, SPOs created access to needed technology and bandwidth as well as reduced isolation and allowed SPOs to continue to meet other needs. It also allowed SPOs to address digital literacy challenges among newcomers, by providing in-person supports and training.

Most clients have phones, not computers, and with internet bandwidth and cost challenges, SMS/texting became a lifeline for many. SPOs send reminders, check-ins, using low cost technology that their clients have access to and use regularly.

Specific promising practices identified in interviews include:

New Brunswick's Rural Settlement Network

"The rural settlement network connects all of these really small groups of agencies with one to five staff to really support one another with best practices and share resources and templates. And they meet on a regular basis on a weekly basis on a monthly basis and do some strategic planning and provide services to one another. And that has shaped really a sense of collaboration and streamlining and some level of standardization as well across the province. And that probably is only the beginning of the first year. And we're already seeing some significant changes. We've been innovative in different ways within the funding that we can get and looking at resources, not just in terms of money, but just in terms of the wealth of knowledge and expertise that are within the sector. That sharing of knowledge and resources and templates and all that so each location has its own reality. So it has really kind of taken away a little bit of competition because now we have this funding approved by IRCC for five years, no one's competing for further funding a little bit at the provincial side. So it's taken away that threat across the agencies and has really opened up the opportunity for collaboration. And it's made a world of difference in some of these smaller communities. Now they're connected to this whole network of people who are doing the same kind of work as they are. And then through that, we're trying to connect some of these smaller agencies with the bigger ones who have 30-40 years of experience and a wealth of various programs and information and create a mentor system or coaching system within the province. And so it's been really beneficial. It's all very new, we are still figuring out all the kinks around it, but for the most part, it's been a big success."

"I don't think that our strategies are particularly innovative, I think mostly, we tried to just listen and have, you know, the people who are the frontlines be part of the conversation. And so in most of the programs that we've ever designed, including, for example, the rural summit network, way, before we launch into the proposal writing for ircc, we had a meeting with all the settlement agencies that we're considering as part of this, and we had, you know, two full days of brainstorming, what are the considerations? And what would this look like and, and to make sure that the process is collaborative as well, and,

and to, you know, collect ideas and hear from when we can do consultations, we're very consultative organizations, we run a number of surveys, we have different working groups, we have various like member meetings and multiple points. And just to make sure that we're, you know, trying to take those ideas from the ground up, and then turn them into initiatives. So the process itself is not necessarily innovative, I think it's just making sure that you're, you're an active listener, and then looking for those opportunities."

This approach is also occurring in Manitoba, according to an IRCC representative:

"We had a lot of organizations in Manitoba, specifically that had like one or two people in them, and we tried to encourage them to partner with each other, to help them build capacity. Because if you're the only person in the office, you're doing the community engagement and the outreach, you're doing the relationship building with all the other, you know, service, providing non settlement organizations in that community, you're doing the client service, you're doing all of the reporting, you're doing a lot of the times your financial management as well, in the administrative work. It's just ridiculous the amount of work that a small center organization has to be able to do and the specialization that they have. I think that they are being very innovative, and that they have the capability to do that. Before the call for proposals in 2019, we encouraged them to start to think creatively and work together. And we said that we were not going to support funding single person offices anymore. So that doesn't mean that those offices don't exist anymore. But it just means that they've now partnered with other organizations, or they have MOU or service purchase agreements. We're funding a bunch of offices under one contribution agreement, as opposed to having these little mini agreements. Some of them were sub \$100,000 a year that we previously gave to these organizations. And that means that we had to monitor every contribution agreement, we had to do activity monitors every year, and we were trying to drive out to these small towns. It was an administrative burden to do for a \$50,000 a year agreement."

Larger to smaller centre replication

New Brunswick Multicultural Centre is evaluating the ISSofBC-developed NewTrack client tracking and reporting system. It is a good example of a made-in-sector approach that can be replicated in other parts of the country:

“Looking ahead we’re establishing a CRM or client relationship management software system within the province. So we're just in the very early phase. We've done a lot of research, and we're possibly going into some negotiations and trying to figure out how the funding is going to happen. But I think that would be life changing for a sector in terms of not necessarily innovative in the sense that no province has done it but innovative for us because we have nothing right now in terms of data management and client relationship software. So hopefully that will really streamline a lot of our decision making and data reporting and play case management across the province.”

Municipal government leadership, focusing on welcoming messaging

Municipalities are where Settlement and inclusion happen. Smaller and rural centres have for a long time struggled with attraction and retention of newcomers. Those that are starting to see success recognize that meeting newcomers along their Settlement journey, creating a welcoming and inclusive community, is key.

“Our new municipal immigration strategy is focused on putting down roots, that feeling of home. And that's what we want people to feel when they get here is that they're at home. And how can we do that? Well, we can do that by connecting them to more than just a job. The job is just the tip of the iceberg. It's everything else that goes along with it. That sense of home and in our way our even our social media handles. It's just that concept of home. Even our city council just approved funding to our local settlement agency for them to be able to hire a full time employee to work with international students and those on temporary work permits, like open work permits. People weren't getting access to services and it was a strain on our own municipal services.”

The complete vs compete approach is an attempt to deal with the culture of competition in the sector. The sense of a lack of cooperation, well documented in the literature, is also echoed by an IRCC representative. They suggested that the attitude between SPOs is in part a legacy of competing for funding, where SPOs see themselves in direct competition with each other:

“They're not they, shouldn't be. They should be working in collaboration, and each has their specialty. So we're trying to implement that within the PNT with the zone approach and all these other things, but it's been met with a lot of resistance in some communities because they're in competition. When you have these divided camps, where there's a ton of dislike and infighting, it affects everything. It affects the sector, it affects the

community. And it's very hard to get the data, when you have two very divisive people coming at you."

On the other hand, in the Northwest Territories, another approach to complete not compete appears to be rolling out successfully. This time, it is a service co-location approach that is also combined with a division of labour in terms of which agency does what work in the settlement service continuum. It came out of a newcomer-centred mindset when agencies noticed that some newcomers were not accessing services. Local agencies came together to provide services in one location. The goal was to increase collaboration, avoid working in silos, as well as to make service referrals easier for newcomers.

The idea originated with local service providers and was proposed to IRCC, which furthers the notion that someone needs to start the innovation conversation, and that there are willing partners in the sector and at IRCC.

Case Management approach

The *complete not compete* mindset could be considered a core element of IRCC and the sector's pilot case management emerging model. In this model IRCC and SPOs agree to a funded division of responsibility. One local SPO is tasked with needs assessment and in-depth case management where necessary. That agency refers clients to other SPOs and other community agencies for services and no longer provides the direct services themselves. The idea is to remove potential duplication, as well as the needs assessment agency favouring their own services when referring.

IRCC and the sector convened a Working Group in 2017 to start the conversation about case management, with an eye to fund a pilot in 2019. They had a complete not compete starting point in the sector to reference: "It is similar to how in our region the language assessment, folks do not actually provide language classes themselves, they do the assessment, and they refer to them but they don't actually have a vested stake in the game. So we wanted a similar approach."

While the approach is still very much in the planning phases, much structural work has been done to define the case management system. Interestingly, the case management model brings a triage perspective and approach, along with training and skills

development, into all settlement services so they can contribute to identifying newcomers who may benefit from a more in-depth case management approach. An indicators tool can help any service provider (such as an ESL teacher) to identify if a client should go for triage to the case management system.

An interesting innovation is that, along with the case management system, and the SPO doing case management not providing direct services, is that the service zones will be established in the rest of the city/region. Each SPO has agreed to serve a specific geographic area, or zone. There is also another layer where specialized programming is available across zones. The idea is to ensure that each area of a city has core Settlement services that newcomers can access, while specialized programming is available city-wide.

An [IRCC SDI-funded intake and assessment process innovation project](#) is being explored as the core assessment tool to be replicated and implemented by partners in the region but its uptake remains to be seen. IRCC doesn't appear to feel it can mandate a system for all SPOs to use, even though this would bring efficiencies and ensure smoother referral processes when it comes to client data. Each regional NAARS provider is given the flexibility to choose and implement their own system. It will be interesting to see how a previously funded project might be replicated in other regions.

AAISA is currently conducting a review of every intake and assessment database being used in the sector in order to gather as much information as possible and provide further information to the sector and IRCC. There is a hope that the systems SPOs choose will at least be interoperable to facilitate warm referrals, but it is unclear how this, or any requirements are part of the decision-making process.

Dialogue and collaboration between agencies is essential to make this work. According to another Northwest Territories SPO the case management approach in Prairie provinces also made sense in their region. SPOs came together to collaborate, negotiating who would do intake and where it made the most sense to refer clients for specific, specialized services.

Women-only swim night in Yellowknife

Smaller centres are ready for replication and promising practices, including ideas that come from clients themselves. In Yellowknife, a successful women-only swim night was suggested by a newcomer volunteering at a local SPO:

"Yellowknife is surrounded by water. There are so many lakes here. It's kind of limiting if you're afraid of the water or if you don't understand how to keep yourself safe on the water. And so in addition to the ladies only swim night we do canoeing programs with some of the newcomer children. We'll have a big picnic at one of the parks and we'll hire someone to have safe canoe rides so they can experience that."

The end result is something that has become popular as well as award winning:

"We need to have people become comfortable and know how to safely maneuver in the water. And so we did win a local award for innovation for the ladies only swim night. It's very popular. It's one of the things that now we've been able to continue. It's completely full every time we do it."

They were able to use evidence to ensure that their programming would be supported when there was pushback and concern about liability from IRCC. There was a high rate of drownings among newcomer populations: *"And so we said, well, this is why we need to do this."*

They also sought to extend their innovation to ensure equitable access:

"We tried to do a men's-only swim night, because we had a male summer student, and he was willing to take that on and facilitate it. But we didn't have much uptake. And I think the men are largely working, they may have their own social networks within their jobs. And I think that perhaps it wasn't such a need for them."

Settlement system collaboration - internally & externally with groups/external partners/stakeholders

There is a sense, especially during the pandemic, of a more urgent need to collaborate:

"I would say that we definitely have to continue breaking down the competitive nature of funded agencies and developing more collaborative, collaborative environments."

And this collaboration needs to be active, not passively expected. Coordination is important:

"If ultimately, we're all working towards the same values of supporting newcomers, and really wanting to ensure that newcomers feel integrated, included in the communities and several routes in their communities, I think we really need to start pulling away that competitive veil between organizations. And I think we have really small agencies in some rural communities, anywhere else in Canada who can be connected either to one another across provinces, or within a single province and whatnot. And I know most provinces have a similar kind of umbrella organization, I'm not sure it's always structured the same way or there's that same connection. But for us, it has worked really, really well. And it has allowed that central point of coordination. So we were seeing great successes, and I think if any other province was interested in looking at this for their own regions, we'd be more than happy to share experiences around that as well."

Collaborating increases accountability:

"So when we, as an organization, collaborate with others, or we within ourselves are collaborating you tend to hold yourself more accountable. You tend to live up to expectations or exceed expectations that way. And I found that that worked really well. And in order for that to work as well, people have to be more transparent. And I've noticed that people have become more transparent that way. Our funder has been more transparent than ever. This time around with our agreement. It's been interesting that we've had virtual calls and monitors and things like that happen. That wouldn't have happened in the past. And it's been very positive that we've had this ongoing communication that's occurred with our funder. It's been quite the shift, actually, it's been more of we're hearing you, we want to see how and what these ideas that we're seeing, like they're actually seeing kind of on the ground level, what's happening. And they're seeing that there are solutions. And it pertains to the outputs that they have on there. And, and they're willing to take a chance, and that trust aspect, in trusting those that they're actually funded."

How to invest in support systems in a new normal

When it comes to technology, interviewees suggest it is time for IRCC to reconsider tech costs as admin and recognize they are program delivery costs that require updating, maintenance, and renewal. With increasing subscription services to technology needed to do the work this means persistent costs. This includes not only hardware, but software, website development and maintenance, security features, IT support, as well as seemingly

intangible “entertainment” costs such as Netflix and Disney+ for centres that act as community hubs for clients, bringing them together for social reasons, but which are actually settlement interventions. This is simply a version of the community potluck or social gathering with food that is widely recognized as an important way to bring newcomers together for both social reasons, but also as a way to introduce settlement services and provide informal support, which may lead to more formal service provision. Budgets not only need to recognize the new technical reality, but also have agility and flexibility built in.

A blanket sector approach does not work either. Regional nuances must be factored in, such as the high cost of internet connectivity in smaller and remote regions. Innovation looks differently in different communities for different types of newcomers that the dialogue is essential to have with funders so they are aware and literate in these nuances and how they impact programming and costs.

Interviewees brought up different ideas about how the funding structure could be changed:

“There is something to be said about reconsidering the value of core operational funding for nonprofit organizations and settlement agencies, and specifically, funding, those kind of less direct project management type roles that are those kinds of stakeholder engagement and more kind of strategic communication type roles, because those are also really, really important. I think what we've really learned over the last year is that those communication aspects and having the time to talk about the work you do and why it's important, communicating your impact, and speaking to the right audiences is extremely important in terms of those relationships. But when you're everyone's doing it on the side of their desk, it's really hard to prioritize that, and that doesn't allow a lot of time for that bonding or relationship building that's required in the sector.”

“One of the conditions might be instead of having to wait for calls for proposals to be able to submit ideas. It would be useful when you have ideas, having some sort of an open structure with either IRCC or another funder, where you could say, listen, this is timely, and it's innovative, and here's why we need to jump on it now. And let's pilot something without waiting for five years.”

“It would be fun to have just like a pool of money that you could apply for if you still have an idea. But that could just be like an open calls for proposals. That's the dream.”

Flexibility within the funding model and Contribution Agreements also came up in conversation with IRCC. Interviewees agreed that nuanced models would require flexibility.

Investing doesn't just mean money, it's also about process and collaboration. For example, within IRCC, specific design challenges have been created and operationalized to look at revising services. The experience, time, resources, dedicated staff, come up in the discussion as essential to making it work (something that was captured in Settlement 2.0) in previous internal IRCC Citizenship and Settlement design challenges. One challenge that took six weeks was successful, in part because of dedicated human resources. An IRCC staff member was designated to take the ideas from the design challenge and operationalize them. They ran four or five pilots and three are now standard operating procedures. It would not have happened without a dedicated team of 3 people pushing the work along.

Interestingly, the lessons and successes of one design challenge don't appear to have made it into a different operational silo on the settlement side in IRCC. In the design challenge that did not end up having an impact on standard operating procedures there was no one pushing it along. In fact, there was overlap and efficiencies between the two design challenges that were not realized because the second effort lacked support and dedicated staff or time to implement it.

The lament is similar to what we consistently hear from SPOs:

"It's great that we have the will. But when you're doing it off the side of your desk, it's gonna fall off."

Consequences of using technology with settlement service

Common themes among interviewees are internal capacity and the technology learning curve for staff, some staff resistance to technology-mediated service delivery, digital literacy and digital divide issues among newcomers (including access to appropriate devices), and how some online activities can be turned into useful reporting statistics if clients are not identified or don't go through an intake (for self-directed online resources, webinars, for example).

An ongoing recognition that a number of services and tools are not mobile friendly and so even if clients have smartphones and internet connection they are limited in what they can do.

How to ensure that investments in technology, especially those that might scale across the sector is essential:

"I think of the small rural organizations through the challenges just like turning to tech and digital worlds, like I am, I'm a young millennial, and I'm even having a hard time kind of keeping up with different forms of technology for terms of like project management and communication. And thinking about the ways that we can serve clients, you know, pre arrival and tracking the CRM and all that, and a lot of rural communities or have a single staff and sometimes a lot of older staff, it's like how do you build that, you know, tech literacy and tech savviness within the sector and to make tech in the digital world, not that intimidating and very user friendly. So for the CRM, that's like a big piece of it. It's like, Are we going to go and invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in a CRM that most of our member agencies are just going to be too afraid to even open up the software and or on their computer? So how do we build that capacity and ensure that that's part of the professional development, training and kind of evolution of the sector as well, because I, you know, COVID has taught us to work from home and work virtually, but the delivery of programs has been a major challenge. And so, you know, if you want to be innovative and want to keep up, building the capacity within the sector will be important."

"The shift was for technology also has meant that there's a pretty large steep learning curve for everyone. So this lifelong learning has really impacted everyone. It's gone from the client up and having to adapt to new delivery models, but then also looking at the way that things holistically. What we've noticed is the shift to online delivery has really focused more on the gaps that were there probably all along, but it just magnified them. And we could no longer ignore the things that we once had ignored. So that's, that's really been one of the biggest challenges, but also one of the biggest rewards that we've had in that we could no longer ignore what we had been ignoring. And that we've had to develop solutions using technology. So whether it's digital or non digital, we've been finding solutions more quickly. Now everyone is so ready. Accessible, more accessible than before with the technology. And this is speaking more of employee management dynamic. When it comes to clients, I would say, not so much. Right? Like there's there that has its challenges there. But, employee and management wise, definitely, we've been able to streamline processes, and accelerate the way that we do things."

Technology allowed some to meet needs in other cities:

"We started to pull from our waitlist and put students online learning in different places because virtually you're all in the same space, right? Your place doesn't matter anymore, right? So we have students who technically reside in one city, who learn with people who reside in other cities. So they went virtually and started supporting parents and children alike. They started to be able to have this kind of network online where they could help support families and parents and positive parenting and child development, and the anxieties of COVID and also being able to have conversations about what the current situation was in where the people were living. Because the vast majority of the people we cater to don't receive their news from local news agencies, they still receive all of their information from abroad from where they came from. Right. So they were really left kind of in the dark, wondering what's happening. So all of these outlets have technology and the fact that everybody who's constant is constantly in communication with one another, the communication aspect has been the biggest key to continuing to evolve quite rapidly, but in a very positive way."

Tech connectivity and unreliable internet in smaller centres creates a gap in access for clients, but also for agencies. There is a need to

"look at IT infrastructure and group procurement for agencies across the country as well as their capacity to provide this kind of access to their clientele, especially in smaller and more isolated communities."

"Experience tells us that if technology is to aid inclusion then research and development should mirror and facilitate the approach of good governance. R&D must be grounded in the daily realities of newcomers' lives. It is crucial that we avoid a 'one-size fits all approach' and that R&D fully integrate the experience of refugees settled and settling in the local reception context. We need to know if smart technologies could aid the integration of newcomers. In order to answer this question we need to assess newcomer needs and capacity."

And, while technology can bring innovation,

"innovative practices are only as good as the people they're intended to be used by. If the product or service does not have that level of functionality for those people to use, it loses

itself. Technology needs to be so personalized and individualized because everyone is at different levels of comfort and curiosity."

Some feel they haven't been able to replicate connections with other peers in the sector in a meaningful way online. Small centre SPO staff feel a bit more isolated:

"I would love an old-fashioned conference. Yeah, you can, you can actually take your time and talk to somebody and have a conversation"

Hybrid or digital services are clearly not for every client:

"I think we will see an increase in remote services. But we also just opened up to curbside service. And we realize also that there are all the clients as well, they just don't like the technology or phone calls, they prefer coming over. I think that there is that piece as well that clients view the necessity of showing their documentation, or they just want to make sure that they're doing things right. So using technology in this way, some don't feel safe enough. It's like there is a need to come over and check over whatever they did."

At the same time, being mobile is useful in smaller centres:

"The rest of us, we just have a laptop, right? So you can plunk it in and work from anywhere. And when we share files, we have the password protected, and I use mostly Google Docs. And, and that's sort of something that we have been using since the very beginning, even keeping track of all the visitors. So then I'm somewhere I'm off site, and I can see if there's any messages and anything I have to follow up with. We kind of have been trying to be mobile as much. We are more responsive and can meet with people and family anywhere."

Appendix1: Interview Guiding Questions

The following questions were sent to each interviewee before scheduled conversations (along with project background information, and the focus of the project) and were used as the basis for the interview:

In this project, we define innovation as: "The digital and non-digital practices and approaches that foster the adaptability and agility needed to enable the settlement sector

to stay “ahead of the curve” in a rapidly changing migration and settlement landscape, with the goal of better serving newcomers to Canada. We note the difference between “innovation (developing something genuinely new) and iteration (refining what works to make it work even better).”

What do you think about this definition?

What conditions, both at a provincial and national level, are necessary for fostering innovative practices, models and approaches within the settlement sector now and in the future?

What innovations are you working on or aware of related to information, services, and service delivery channels for newcomers to Canada? Are you aware of examples of promising innovative practices, models and approaches within the settlement sector that have had a positive impact on newcomers?

How would you describe the experiences of newcomers in relation to these innovative practices, models, approaches? How should the sector ensure that newcomers and communities are at the heart of how services are created, managed, and provided?

What recommendations would you provide in regard to enabling collaboration and embracing innovative practices, models and approaches within the sector? What are the unique needs of rural, smaller centres, and smaller organizations when it comes to operationalizing innovation?