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research

Migrant integration services and coping with the digital divide: challenges and opportunities of the COVID-19 pandemic

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In this research note, I reflect on the impacts of the shift to online service delivery for voluntary and community organisations. In particular, I report on initial findings from research being undertaken on migrant integration organisations in Quebec (Canada) and Scotland (UK). The research shows four key emerging themes: the complexities of the digital divide (including skills and access to information and communication technology, and the issue of the number of devices in a household to support multiple users); trust, communication and access to online services; the breaching of the public/private divide as practitioners provide digital services from their home; and the benefits and opportunities for digital service delivery. The research note concludes by reflecting on the long-term implications for voluntary and community sector services as they adapt to and recover from the pandemic and engage in long-term planning.

Key words migrant integration • digital divide • online service delivery

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a worldwide crisis for third sector organisations, which have had to quickly adapt their board governance, internal procedures and approaches to fundraising (Maher et al, 2020; McMullin and Raggio, 2020). While most organisations have shifted to working from home and new forms of online collaboration, organisations that provide direct services have been placed in a challenging situation of trying to adapt service delivery to social distancing and lockdown guidelines (Shi et al, 2020). This has been especially difficult for organisations whose service users are particularly vulnerable and may lack information and communication technology (ICT) access and/or skills. In this research note, I reflect

on the impact of the abrupt shift from in-person to online delivery in the case of organisations providing migrant integration services.

Third sector organisations in many countries provide a range of crucial services for asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants in order to support their successful integration into their new communities. In Scotland and the province of Quebec in Canada, community organisations provide practical skills for new migrants through language classes, employment support and advice in accessing housing and benefits. In addition, many organisations provide mental health services, social activities and other support to help migrants acculturate, and cultural activities to help them keep a connection with their home countries. While the range of these services is broad, one key similarity is that they require a degree of social contact in order to be effective. The COVID-19 pandemic has therefore had the dual impact of increasing the need for services while simultaneously constraining organisations' ability to deliver them.

This research note is structured as follows. First, I briefly review the literature on migrant integration services, the move towards digital service delivery, and the digital divide as it existed pre-pandemic. I then present some initial findings about how third sector organisations that provide migrant integration services are adapting to the pandemic, and the challenges and opportunities they are experiencing in the push to move from traditional in-person delivery to online/remote services. Finally, I reflect critically on the longer-term implications of lockdown, social distancing and virtual service delivery for the voluntary and community sector.

Migrant integration services

Regardless of a migrant's immigration route, many migrants and asylum seekers require some degree of support in order to facilitate successful social and economic integration into their new country. Migrant integration services relate to three stages of the settlement process: adjustment, adaptation and longer-term integration (Richmond and Shields, 2005; Shields et al, 2016). These services, and the degree of funding and support offered by the state, vary considerably from one country to another, dependent on the government's public policy stance on immigration and refugee policy (Jenson and Papillon, 2000; Mulvey, 2018; Paquet and Xhardez, 2020). In some contexts, integration services are provided (or at least funded) by the state as part of a comprehensive view to making immigration programmes a success, while in other contexts migrants are largely left to fend for themselves. In both instances, the third sector plays a large role in providing immediate/emergency services to new arrivals, as well as longer-term support, skills/capability building and language courses (Garkisch et al, 2017). Third sector organisations traditionally provide migrant integration services in-person to facilitate access for vulnerable populations and to create a personalised, welcoming experience. This is because of the nature of the services provided, which require empathy and trust building, and often rely on language interpreters as intermediaries between service users and frontline staff.

Online public services and the digital divide

Since the turn of the millennium, as governments (particularly at the local level) begin to push many of their services and functions online (Curtis, 2019), there has been a simultaneous academic debate about the effectiveness of online service delivery

and e-government, and the issues of accessibility and the digital divide. Much of this debate has focused on the lack of reliable broadband in some communities, particularly rural areas (Piatak et al, 2019), as well as the deepening divide between older and younger people (Sourbati, 2009) and between poorer and wealthier communities (Ragnedda, 2017). When it comes to immigrant populations – which include short-term economic migrants, permanent immigrants and refugees/asylum seekers – the wide range of backgrounds, educational levels and economic statuses means that the digital divide is not uniformly experienced. However, the migrants who need to access integration services are also more likely to be a member of at least one category that is less likely to have access to ICT, which creates additional challenges for social inclusion and integration (Alam and Imran, 2015).

Previous work on online public services and the digital divide relates to a very different environment to the one faced by organisations in 2020 – prior to the pandemic, transitions to online service delivery could be done gradually, intentionally and with other in-person delivery options available for those without ICT access. By contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused this shift online across the board, with limited ability to plan ahead or consider the impacts. As Agostino et al (2020) discuss, this has created dilemmas for public service providers regarding user engagement, planning and determination about whether services should be paid for or free. Furthermore, this exacerbates the barriers to service access for vulnerable populations. There is therefore an urgent need to consider the impacts, challenges and opportunities of this emergency shift to digital service provision.

Methodology

This research note is based on ongoing research being undertaken with third sector organisations that provide migrant integration services in Montreal, Quebec (Canada) and Glasgow, Scotland. These two contexts were initially selected as part of a comparative research project on immigration policy in ‘stateless nations’, and the ways that migrant integration organisations involve their service users in designing and delivering services. However, as the project started in March 2020 at the onset of the pandemic, the research focus necessarily shifted to investigate the impact of COVID-19 and the challenges encountered in adapting to the pandemic.

The research is based on qualitative fieldwork with organisations in both contexts, including observation of open online events/meetings, analysis of organisational documents and interviews. Prior to beginning the interviews with the case study organisations, I sent a scoping survey in July 2020 to migrant integration organisations in both contexts in order to inform the key direction of the research and gauge the importance of various issues for organisations. The survey included several closed questions regarding the challenges and changes faced by organisations as a result of the pandemic, and several open questions where respondents were invited to provide further detail about adaptations to their services and their current concerns and priorities. Thirteen responses were received to the survey (nine in Montreal and four in Glasgow) – nine from frontline workers (for example, project coordinators and community development workers) and four from chief executives/directors. In addition to this survey, I have analysed social media accounts and publicly available minutes of meetings to explore how these organisations are moving their services

online – or not – and the challenges they are facing, and have thus far conducted eight interviews with practitioners (two in Montreal and six in Glasgow).

COVID-19 and the shift to online service delivery

The Quebec provincial government and the Scottish government provide funding to community organisations to provide a range of integration services to newly arrived migrants and refugees, including language classes, social integration activities, cultural activities, support in finding a job or training, and advice in navigating the asylum process or other bureaucratic procedures. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, government policy responses aiming to curb or mitigate the spread of the virus varied considerably, from incredibly restrictive measures closing all non-essential businesses and nationwide stay-at-home orders in some countries, while others (at different points) took a light-touch approach of encouraging – but not mandating – social distancing and hand washing (Hale et al, 2020). Both Montreal and Glasgow have gone through stages during which non-essential businesses/services were ordered to close or shift online, presenting migrant integration organisations with challenging decisions as they sought to adapt.

In response to the survey question asking respondents how the pandemic affected their organisation (moving services online, cancelling activities, modifying procedures, introducing new activities/services or other), all respondents indicated that either all services (11) or some of their services (2) had been moved online. While a small survey is not necessarily representative of the sector as a whole, this finding is consistent with other recent research on the impact of COVID-19 on non-profits (Young et al, 2020). As I will discuss below, participants in the research raised several important themes and issues related to the abrupt move of service delivery from in-person to online delivery:

- the lack of reliable or consistent access to technology or the internet;
- the unwillingness of service users to access online services or their discomfort in accessing online services;
- the breaching of the public/private divide in service delivery;
- the benefits and opportunities of online service delivery.

Access to online services and the digital divide

One of the first important themes for migrant integration services in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic is that many service users – whether economic migrants or asylum seekers – do not always have the technology that they need to be able to access services at a distance. The issue of the destitution faced by asylum seekers has been well documented (Kissoon, 2010), so it is perhaps unsurprising that this beneficiary group is more likely to be affected by the digital divide. While asylum seekers often do have access to mobile phones (including smart phones) (Zijlstra and Liempt, 2017; Alencar et al, 2019), Wi-Fi access in accommodation offered by the state and/or mobile data that is sufficient for video conferencing is often less reliable. Lockdown measures early in the pandemic – and later reinstated in some locations – also meant that access to the internet in other spaces, particularly public libraries, became impossible. The lack of access to these public and community spaces that

previously provided a lifeline to asylum seekers and refugees has further deepened this digital divide.

At the same time, not all migrant groups lack access to digital devices and Wi-Fi in their homes, and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic many service users might have been able to easily access services (such as online language classes and other webinars) virtually, for example while their children were at school. However, lockdown meant that suddenly the entire household was at home, often meaning that a larger number of family members might need to access the internet at once. Digital access is therefore no longer simply about having a device and internet in the home, but about having a sufficient *number* of devices (ideally laptops/PCs rather than just smart phones) that allow several family members to access education, work and services virtually. With the amount of bandwidth required for video conferencing, this becomes particularly problematic when several family members need to access the internet at once. This has therefore highlighted a different dynamic to the digital divide.

Trust, communication and access to online services

A second theme identified was that some services have translated smoothly to online provision, while others have struggled to maintain engagement with their client groups. As one survey respondent explained: “[Our] groups have seen a fall in engagement generally; this is due to lack of access to adequate digital equipment to contribute, caring responsibilities of women/families, low wellbeing levels across the community.” Another respondent indicated that some of their services, such as language classes, have translated well to distance learning, while others (such as mental health support) have been unable to do so. These responses highlight some of the further challenges to online service provision – withdrawing the in-person contact may potentially decrease service users’ trust and comfort with the process. However, this lack of service user engagement may equally be as a result of a perception of decreased service quality or insufficient communication – issues that frontline staff have found difficult to assess precisely because the move to online delivery has removed their traditional lines of communication with service users.

While online service provision in general can have particular cultural and social barriers to participation, in some instances it is the particular format or application that proves to be a barrier. For example, one interviewee noted that some migrant groups – particularly asylum seekers who come from repressive regimes – have indicated concerns about data protection and privacy in using some platforms. This is especially the case with Facebook (which many community organisations are increasingly using to communicate with service users due to its ubiquity and ease of use), which interviewees suggested concerns some refugees in terms of privacy protection. The increasing prevalence of Zoom as a communications tool at the beginning of the pandemic also highlighted major security concerns with the application, with ‘Zoombombing’ (video calls being interrupted by malicious users) causing major disruptions for online meetings. Some migrant integration services noted that they have acted on feedback from service users to ensure that they use a platform that people are comfortable with, while others have had to rely on free platforms (such as Facebook) or whatever platform their staff have the skills to use.

Service provision via video conferencing and the public/private divide

In other instances, the first two issues (access to a computer and internet, and cultural comfort in accessing services online) were deemed to be less of an issue. However, the transition from in-person service delivery to digital delivery presents a new phenomenon – the fact that people now access services and meetings from the privacy of their homes (from their computer screen), which means that service users and practitioners are now welcoming each other into their private space. The increasing ubiquity of Zoom meetings has become a new feature of most people's professional life, with an increasing acknowledgement of interruptions from children and pets becoming part of the new reality of video conferencing. However, breaching this public/private divide between practitioners and service users – many of whom are in challenging circumstances – introduces a new power dynamic. As one practitioner described, when holding a Zoom meeting with a service user, they felt particularly conscious of the fact that they were holding the call from their comfortable house, while the service user was showing them that her cupboards were empty as she described the difficulty of her situation.

"It's not all bad" – opportunities and benefits

While the COVID-19 pandemic has no doubt been challenging for everyone in terms of ways of working, health and wellbeing, and all of the economic implications, there have been some silver linings to the forced move to online service delivery. In fact, some practitioners noted that some services have translated well to an online format, allowing them to broaden their reach to clients who previously found it difficult to attend in-person services for various reasons. In particular, online service delivery means that services can eliminate the stress and cost of travel, potentially increasing accessibility for some users.

One interviewee in Montreal indicated that while some services, namely support groups, have not been able to make the transition to online, their one-to-one appointments have been very successful. In particular, they noted that while no-shows for in-person appointments were common, this has not been the case for Zoom appointments. They explained that they have made the decision to continue the option for Zoom appointments in order to continue this flexibility for clients. Furthermore, the move to digital delivery has also enabled organisations to be creative about what they offer service users, with several organisations indicating that they have begun offering new workshops and webinars since the beginning of the pandemic, which they previously would not have had time for, or would have worried about attendance for. In particular, several organisations now produce short videos (often on Facebook) presenting their service users and practitioners as a way to increase connections during a difficult time.

Discussion and conclusions

In this research note, I have reflected on some of the new issues for migrant integration services related to the move to online service delivery that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While important research about the digital divide and the impact of transitioning many public services to digital delivery for older and other vulnerable populations has been undertaken, the COVID-19 pandemic has required

an unexpected and urgent shift of many services that have traditionally been delivered in person to a format delivered online. This has created new situations that in some cases exacerbate previously noted challenges about online delivery (such as the lack of reliable access to computers and the internet), while in others new challenges are introduced, such as the social and cultural barriers to video conferencing and the introduction of previously public services into the private domain. At the same time, participants in the research noted some benefits, including the ability to schedule new types of services and activities, such as webinars, as well as the improved accessibility to services in some instances.

As this research note is based on ongoing research, the themes identified are not necessarily comprehensive or generalisable. As we progress through the various stages of recovery from the pandemic (McMullin and Raggo, 2020), more research is needed to continue to explore the long-term implication of online service delivery. For instance, if services continue to be delivered online, how will this impact individuals who are excluded by the digital divide? Will online service delivery be complemented by a greater focus on digital skills training and efforts to increase access to technology, and if so, who will deliver this training? What are the implications for small voluntary and community organisations, which may lack the time and resources to deliver services online? On the other hand, once the worst of the pandemic is over, will services return to normal delivery or will some continue to be delivered online? Considering these questions will improve our understanding of not only digital service delivery, but also the opportunities and challenges for the voluntary and community sector more generally.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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