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**Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council –
TRIEC: A Model for Local Solutions**

This paper describes the context in which the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) was created and provides a brief history of the council. It presents information on TRIEC's philosophical and organizational approach, describes how it engaged a broad cross-section of stakeholders, and evaluates TRIEC and its accomplishments. Lastly, the paper outlines conditions for success and recommendations to persons in other regions who are interested in creating an immigrant employment council. Details of specific TRIEC initiatives such as mentoring and internships can be found on the TRIEC website.

The Toronto context

It is not surprising that Canada's first regional immigrant employment initiative was created in Canada's largest city, which is also the country's largest driver of economic activity, home to 40% of the country's corporate head offices, and site of Canada's largest concentration of immigrants. Almost half of Toronto's metropolitan population is foreign-born. Each year, well over 100,000 persons — close to half of all immigrants arriving in Canada — settle in the Toronto region. Most of them have some form of post-secondary education. With their skills and knowledge of home country languages and markets, these newcomers can provide a competitive advantage to a city characterized by incredible diversity and growing levels of international trade.

Despite trends toward more educated and skilled immigrant cohorts, newcomers to Toronto are increasingly likely to be living in long-term poverty and to depend on social assistance. Census and other data reveal disproportionate numbers of newcomers to be unemployed, underemployed, and not working in their fields. These labour market failures pose serious challenges to the future prosperity of the Toronto region, as well as to Canada as a whole: by 2011, it is expected that all of the country's net labour force growth will occur through immigration. Moreover, despite the Toronto region's diverse economic base, developments such as the downloading of social services to municipalities and rising education costs have generated concerns about the underlying health of the regional economy.

TRIEC's beginnings

In June 2002, the Toronto City Summit — a conference of leaders representing the city's various sectors and communities — was held to assess the Toronto region's strengths and challenges and to shape future directions for the region. Following the Summit, the Toronto City Summit Alliance (TCSA) was formed to address the challenges the Summit identified as critical to a shared future. The TCSA identified the inclusion of immigrants into the labour market as a key challenge facing the Toronto region. *Enough Talk*, the TCSA action plan for the Toronto region released in April 2003, recommended the creation of a Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC). TRIEC was launched in September 2003 as an initiative of TCSA with the backing of The Maytree Foundation.

The idea of TRIEC predates the TCSA, and this part of the story is integral to understanding TRIEC's development – and its success. Prior to the Toronto City Summit, The Maytree Foundation had singled out immigrant employment issues as a particular focus within its poverty reduction mandate. This focus built on Executive Director Ratna Omidvar's past work in the settlement sector, notably as Executive Director of Skills for Change, as well as her own personal experience as a skilled immigrant in Canada. Maytree's analysis that served as a foundation for the creation of TRIEC recognized several contributing barriers and challenges:

- **Immigrants face significant barriers to entering the labour market**, such as lack of adequate information related to employment, difficulty in having qualifications recognized, lack of access to labour market language training, insufficient bridging programs to remedy skill differences, and a lack of opportunities to gain Canadian work experience.
- **Government policy and programming for immigrants is focused primarily on initial needs**, such as basic shelter, orientation and language instruction. There is a need for services that address longer-term needs as immigrants attempt to start their own businesses, gain employment or access mainstream services that may be poorly equipped to serve them.
- **Policies and programs lack coordination, are poorly integrated, and are often unresponsive to the specific needs of the Toronto region.** There is no formal mechanism for municipalities or other stakeholders in the Toronto region to work together in the development of relevant federal and provincial policies and programs.

Against this background, The Maytree Foundation and public policy expert Naomi Alboim in April 2002 released *Fulfilling the Promise: Integrating Immigrant Skills into the Canadian Economy* through the Caledon Institute of Social Policy. *Fulfilling the Promise* was the first articulation of many of the ideas that would take hold in Toronto soon thereafter. Most notably, it proposed the creation of a “leadership council to foster collaboration, identify priorities and linkages, and communicate results.” The council was envisioned as one component of a broader systems approach to integrating immigrant skills. The authors of *Fulfilling the Promise* also advocated multi-stakeholder collaboration and the need to focus on practical and measurable solutions. Lastly, the document specified a focus on “skilled immigrants,” including those seeking access to regulated professions but excluding those in the skilled trades.

To research *Fulfilling the Promise*, Ratna Omidvar and Naomi Alboim traveled across Canada to speak to experts on immigrant workforce integration and to present their ideas at various conferences. Information gathered and exchanged during these travels helped to crystallize a vision for locally based, rather than national, initiatives. Afterwards, Ratna and Maytree Chairman Alan Broadbent were invited to be part of the TCSA. Ratna joined the immigration working group and worked with TCSA Chair David Pecaut to bring further attention to the issue. By that time, they already had a focused plan in place that included obtaining a recommendation from the TCSA to form TRIEC.

When the creation of TRIEC was announced in June 2003, Ratna Omidvar, David Pecaut and others depicted the council as a group of dedicated individuals actively working towards solutions through specific initiatives. Participants were invited to come to the table, not for a meeting, but to decide upon a

course of action. Instead of being educated about the difficulties of jurisdiction and the like, participants were presented with a range of very tangible, practical ideas such as internships, mentoring and employer outreach. Early on, stakeholders realized that if they really wanted to be part of the solutions they needed to come to the table, even without realizing exactly what their role would be.

TRIEC's primary goal was to identify local solutions that would lead to more effective and efficient labour market integration of immigrants in the Toronto region. To achieve this goal, the council focused on three objectives:

1. Increasing access to value-added services that support labour market integration of skilled immigrants;
2. Working with key stakeholders, particularly employers, to build their capacity in recognizing and valuing immigrant skills; and,
3. Working with governments to increase local coordination and collaboration in planning and programming around this issue.

From the beginning, TRIEC was depicted as an initiative that was essential for Toronto. David Pecaut, Ratna Omidvar, Alan Broadbent and others worked diligently to attract visible participation from the private sector and community leaders. David Pecaut recruited Manulife Financial CEO Dominic D'Alessandro to become the TRIEC Chair. D'Alessandro soon thereafter published an open letter to the Prime Minister outlining six concrete steps the federal government could take to integrate skilled immigrants.

In addition to being promoted by the TCSA, other factors worked in favour of the creation of TRIEC as championed by The Maytree Foundation. First, the TCSA operated on the premise that an existing group should act wherever appropriate. In this case, while there were many services being provided to skilled immigrants in Toronto, there was no one organization that proactively brought all players to the table. While it may have been possible for the City to assume responsibility for an immigrant employment council, or to at least have taken on more of a leadership role, some participants believe that TRIEC had more flexibility and nimbleness because it was not government-led. Second, labour market integration issues were becoming more prominent at the federal level as well. This helped TRIEC to secure start-up funding from Citizenship and Immigration Canada - Ontario Region and Canadian Heritage.

Philosophical and organizational approach

It is often said that when something is not working well, Canadians wait for the government to do something about it. When an issue involves jurisdictional and other complexities, however, government action may be a long time coming. It was with this in mind that the leadership behind TRIEC decided to work towards solutions, and to bring governments on board in the process. In the words of Founding TRIEC Director Ratna Omidvar,

“We did not ask anybody’s permission. If we had, we would still be talking. We said we were going to do this, and we invited people to join us. We did not build an organization first ... we had no bureaucracy, no bylaws. Instead, we focused on action, results and early wins.”

The focus was on bringing the right people and the right ideas to the table. Key players thought it was crucial that TRIEC be employer-led but at the same time be very inclusive and broad-based.

In hindsight, the personalities involved with TRIEC agree that “jumping in” was the right approach, allowing TRIEC to capitalize on the momentum of the TCSA and to utilize the capacity and leadership of Maytree. At the time, everyone had grown tired of research and recommendations alone. People wanted to see action, and they wanted to be part of making it happen. Skilled immigrants in particular wanted results.

The focus on feasibility meant that some early proposals, such as the creation of a financial services portal, fell by the wayside. The Career Bridge internship program gave immigrants a first tangible

program, but it posed challenges in terms of the scale of operations needed. TRIEC then focused on mentoring programs which depended on matches with volunteers, which could be expanded more rapidly and was less expensive to administer. There was no master plan, and that made it all the more exciting. Participants' uncertainties about how initiatives would turn out were tempered by incredible enthusiasm for TRIEC's objectives.

At the beginning, working groups were created to focus on particular areas of interest. This was a good strategy for including a wide range of interested individuals, building understanding of and loyalty to TRIEC, and getting people to better identify with TRIEC. Later, after the original goal of inclusion had been met, some of the less productive working groups ceased to function.

According to persons who have participated on various TRIEC committees, they maintain their enthusiasm about TRIEC because they can see the successes: the mentorship program, language testing work with all key stakeholders, the "To Employment" document, and more. They also like the openness and transparency of decision-making processes and the sense of shared ownership around various initiatives. For example, service providers are encouraged to adopt various TRIEC programs — or aspects of them — to use themselves.

Stakeholder engagement

TRIEC has become known for its ability to convene a broad cross-section of stakeholders, and to keep them at the table. This was something of a departure from other collaborative efforts that tend to reach out to the same overworked people.

In particular, the involvement of the private sector has been viewed as both unique and essential to TRIEC's successes. As described above, TRIEC found champions who were willing to "leverage" their relationships, that is, use their business and personal networks to further the cause of TRIEC. These champions were educated about the poor labour market outcomes experienced by many skilled immigrants, and how this constituted a "market failure" or business problem. These corporate leaders became more conscious of the fact that their own hiring practices were screening out qualified candidates. In some cases, they became converts to the cause of improved employment prospects for immigrants after personally taking on immigrants as interns or mentees: they saw the benefits and wanted to promote the cause based on first-hand experiences. Many corporate leaders became personally motivated by a tremendous sense of satisfaction gained from the success stories they helped to create. As a result, the TRIEC leadership was not acting alone but with support from some of the city's most influential personalities who were getting the message out through their networks.

A second key stakeholder group has been government. Civil servants participate in TRIEC's only single stakeholder group, the Intergovernmental Relations Committee (IGR). The IGR exists to explore opportunities for collaboration and new mechanisms for funding and policy making and is chaired by Naomi Alboim who has a background in government herself. The IGR consists of representatives from all departments and ministries in all three orders of government that have an interest in the issue of immigrant integration. Indeed, this was the first time that such a group had ever been convened. Many members had never even met their counterparts in other departments or orders of governments. One mechanism for overcoming the initial lack of trust that naturally existed within the IGR was that all meetings were deliberately held in camera.

A third key stakeholder group for TRIEC has been the settlement sector. At the time of TRIEC's launch, persons working in the settlement sector had been complaining of barriers to immigrant employment for years, and so having their first-hand knowledge shared within TRIEC was very important. At the same time, TRIEC did not consult much with the sector prior to starting up. Instead, the word went out and agencies were invited to sign on. When faced with the decision of which settlement agencies to invite, TRIEC leadership opted to include the umbrella organizations such as OCASI that had broad representation.

Many concerns were raised in the settlement sector about how TRIEC might evolve. Some feared that TRIEC would become an intermediary between them and funders. Others objected to the prominent role being played by employers in TRIEC. As TRIEC has pushed policy-makers to support new kinds of initiatives, some of these tensions have remained, but they have become less acute. It helped that TRIEC did not readily get involved directly with program delivery. For example, TRIEC worked through existing settlement organizations to raise the profile of mentoring and increase the number of matches through The Mentoring Partnership program.

Other groups of stakeholders represented within TRIEC include labour, occupational regulatory bodies, post-secondary institutions, and assessment service providers.

Current situation: TRIEC grows independent

TRIEC was essentially the brainchild of The Maytree Foundation, and it remains attached to the foundation to this date. However, the relationship has evolved. In the first four years of operation, it ran as a project of the foundation and the Executive Director, Ratna Omidvar also served as the Executive Director of TRIEC.

In early 2007, a decision was made to incorporate TRIEC as a not for profit charitable organization with its own independent Board of Directors. This was due to a number of factors. First, the response to TRIEC has been overwhelmingly positive and as a result has grown by leaps and bounds. Whereas TRIEC originally may have been conceived of as an aspirational initiative, it has become much more of a movement, requiring its own persona.

Second, the large amount of public money being received by TRIEC has created a necessity to be more transparent and directly accountable to the public.

A foundation board has been established and Ratna Omidvar is the founding chair. One of its first actions was to appoint Elizabeth McIsaac as Executive Director. However, at this point, it is still technically a project of The Maytree Foundation until incorporation can be completed. TRIEC feels that with these building blocks in place, it can now focus on building a solid governance model.

TRIEC has also diversified its funding sources. Today, TRIEC and its initiatives receive financial support from The Maytree Foundation, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Government of Canada Foreign Credential Recognition Program, Manulife Financial, Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, The Ontario Trillium Foundation, Region of Peel, TD Bank Financial Group, and United Way of Peel Region.

TRIEC has extended its activities beyond the City of Toronto through The Mentoring Partnership in York Region and is in close contact with key representatives from Peel Region. At present, TRIEC is planning to hire two marketing managers who will be tasked with acquainting small- to medium-sized enterprises in the regions with tools TRIEC has developed to make it easier to hire immigrants.

Evaluation

Evaluation of TRIEC's progress is based on a variety of approaches. Impact can be measured by individuals affected by the initiatives of the council, in particular skilled immigrants. TRIEC launched The Mentoring Partnership program and worked with the Career Edge Organization to develop Career Bridge - an internship program. Together, the two programs have served over 2,000 skilled immigrants within the Toronto Region. The Mentoring Partnership which began in 2004, currently has 1,400 registered mentors, with over 1,900 mentoring matches and a 70% success rate of participants finding full-time employment. Since 1996, Career Bridge has seen over 600 immigrants complete the internship program and has an 85% success rate of participants finding full-time employment. (All figures in this section are current as of May 2007.)

Each of these programs also has other success measures. One of the objectives of TRIEC is to raise awareness among the employer community, and to engage them actively in the issue. In the case of

Career Bridge, delivered by the Career Edge organization, over 130 employers have taken interns. The Mentoring Partnership has enlisted 45 corporate partners for the recruitment of volunteer mentors. Some of these partners have embraced the program to the extent that they recognize their employees' involvement through performance appraisals, and actively encourage high-potential employees to register.

Other measures of employer engagement are evaluated through the *hireimmigrants.ca* program. The program provides interactive tools and resources to accelerate the integration of skilled immigrants into organizations. The *hireimmigrants.ca* program has:

- Recorded over 125,000 unique visitors to the website
- Subscribed over 800 contacts to weekly HR e-tips
- Attracted over 550 participants to seminars, with another 700 downloads of tele-seminars after the fact
- Identified 89 promising practices from 28 employer case studies

In addition, TRIEC is presenting content to post-secondary institutions that provide HR management programming for inclusion into appropriate course curricula.

TRIEC also measures its impact through media coverage. In May 2006, the council launched a public awareness campaign which generated significant media coverage, including a special section in the *Toronto Star*, several radio interviews, and numerous articles in print media.

The impact of working with government can be evaluated through sustained commitment to the Intergovernmental Relations (IGR) committee and the recent "To Employment" mapping document produced by this committee.

Accomplishments

The following are among TRIEC's accomplishments to date:

- Many people think differently about immigrants: it is no longer appropriate to say that immigrants are a drain on our system.
- TRIEC has harnessed business leaders to make a difference.
- TRIEC has included a broad range of stakeholders and interested groups, creating more common ground among them.
- TRIEC has leveraged financial and non-financial contributions from a range of stakeholders.
- Specific programs such as internships and mentorships have helped immigrants.
- TRIEC has used a collaborative approach to generate and develop ideas that are solution-oriented and practical.
- TRIEC has shown that a local body with local impact can achieve workable solutions within a local context, and it has demonstrated the need for flexible approaches more broadly.

Conditions for success

TRIEC has identified, and the above analysis supports, the following conditions for success:

Foundational Elements

- **Case for Support:** A community, city or region needs to understand the issue in their local context. It may be that the city or community is already a magnet for immigrants, and that the challenge is one of finding effective mechanisms for ensuring their access to appropriate employment. It may be that the potential for economic growth is there, but there are skills and labour shortages, and the challenge is one of attracting immigrants. The solutions for each of these, the partners and stakeholders, and the strategies will vary. What is important is that the analysis, and subsequent approach and solutions, are grounded in the real conditions of the local community.

- **Catalyst:** In the case of TRIEC there were a number of factors, as well as individual catalysts, that were critical to getting it off the ground. Organizations like the TCSA created momentum and drew attention to the issue. Individuals like TCSA Chair David Pecaut were instrumental in recruiting champions and making the idea of TRIEC come to life.
- **Corporate champions:** The issue of creating better conditions for including skilled immigrants in the workplace inherently requires the support and commitment of the corporate community, and therefore champions in the sector. When corporate leaders champion a cause, other employers become interested.
- **Convening capacity:** Local coordination requires a host organization that has the capacity to bring expected and unexpected players to the table. In order to be effective in this, the organization needs to have credibility and be able to leverage local relationships. In the case of TRIEC, The Maytree Foundation had a long-standing knowledge of immigrant employment issues and benefited from the perception that foundations are neutral players. Maytree's capacity to financially support TRIEC was also very important, giving TRIEC the opportunity to develop without the pressures of having to find external funding right away.

Building Blocks

- **Strategic focus:** Success depends on establishing goals and objectives that are practical and doable, and that are strategically focused. Setting goals that are too broad or vague risks making those goals impossible to achieve.
- **Local lens:** The approach, process and goals of the initiative must be viewed through a local lens. A single template or blueprint for local coordination does not exist.
- **Early wins:** Picking "low hanging fruit" will demonstrate early success to the community/city/region and help to build support and momentum.
- **Leadership approach:** Leadership is needed to make ideas work. Specific leaders should be identified to implement any idea or intervention.
- **Broad base of understanding/support:** Having a broad base of support for the initiatives and community investment in the ideas requires a certain level of public awareness. Raising public awareness should be incorporated into ongoing objectives and activities of local coordination.

Recommendations

When asked what they would recommend to groups in other cities interested in pursuing multi-stakeholder immigrant employment initiatives, persons who have worked with TRIEC stated the following:

- Find a strong champion who is credible to employers (e.g., a mayor, political official, business leader or education leader).
- Find champions who can engage a full range of partners and keep them from breaking away from the initiative. This is a real challenge within such a fragmented field.
- Involve employers.
- Place your interest in the interest of others; let others champion your ideas. Work from a premise of "no ownership of ideas."
- Proceed from a values-based position that is reinforced by an in-depth understanding of the issue.
- Be focused.
- Be inclusive.
- Be persistent.
- Be true to your local context.

- Keep your eye on two prizes: building the movement, and proving to immigrants that this is being done for them.
- Get some good success stories to tell early on.
- Focus on outcomes and impact rather than process; don't take a problem-based approach; focus on inherent possibilities instead of jurisdiction and rigidity; start with action.
- The initiative has to be from the ground up and local, not led by government.

Born of a vision by The Maytree Foundation and a recommendation of the TCSA, TRIEC began as a stakeholder movement that drew attention and brought cachet to questions of immigrant labour market integration. As TRIEC becomes an independent entity it will continue to pursue effective solutions for immigrant employment and will remain committed to adding value to the issue through convening, idea generation and action.

by Sarah V. Wayland, PhD

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