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# Bridging the Gaps: Access to Formal Support Services among Young African Immigrants and Refugees in Metro Vancouver

**Abstract**

Although it is widely recognized that the most marginalized people tend to face extra barriers when accessing mainstream services intended to serve everyone, few studies have dealt with the specific barriers and challenges that immigrant and refugee youth from small, marginalized communities encounter when seeking access to services aimed at facilitating their settlement and integration into Canadian society. Our exploratory study of the participation of young African newcomers in youth programs in Metro Vancouver goes some way towards filling this gap. In this paper, we report our key findings and their policy implications. The central finding of this study is that there are many gaps between the needs of young African newcomers and the services available in the wider community. While gaps inhibit successful integration by maintaining a separation of youth from mainstream society, bridges create a continuum of services that offer a stable pathway for youth and promote their integration into mainstream society. Unfortunately, in their attempts to access formal support networks, young African newcomers encounter more gaps than bridges. While newcomers from all countries have particular needs and challenges, the experiences of the young Africans described in this study provide an important reference point for scholars and practitioners who are concerned about the predicaments of newcomer youth, particularly refugees and those from marginalised communities.

**Résumé**

Bien qu'il soit largement reconnu que les personnes les plus marginalisées ont tendance à faire face à des obstacles supplémentaires quand ils cherchent à accéder aux services conventionnels destinés à tous, peu d'études ont porté sur les obstacles spécifiques et les défis auxquels les jeunes immigrants et refugiés, de petites communautés marginalisées rencontrent lorsqu'ils cherchent à accéder aux services pouvant faciliter leur établissement et intégration dans la société canadienne. Notre étude exploratoire de la participation des jeunes nouveaux arrivants africains dans les programmes de jeunesse de Metro Vancouver, va dans le sens de combler cette lacune. Dans cet article, nous présentons nos conclusions principales ainsi que leurs implications politiques. La conclusion principale de cette étude est qu'il y a beaucoup d'écarts entre les besoins des jeunes nouveaux arrivants africains et les services disponibles dans la communauté plus large. Pendant que les écarts empêchent l'intégration réussie en maintenant la jeunesse séparée de la société principale, les ponts créent une continuité des services qui offre une voie stable aux jeunes et promeut leur intégration dans la société principale. Malheureusement, dans leurs tentatives d'accès à des réseaux formels de soutien, les jeunes nouveaux arrivants africains rencontrent plus d'écarts que de ponts. Alors que les nouveaux arrivants de tous les pays ont des besoins et défis particuliers, l'expérience des jeunes africains décrite dans cette étude fournit un point de référence important pour les chercheurs et praticiens qui sont préoccupés par les conditions précaires des jeunes nouveaux arrivants, particulièrement les réfugiés et ceux des communautés marginalisées.

*CES* Volume 48 Number 1 (2016), 77-100

## Introduction

Young people make up a significant portion of newcomers to Canada. In 2013, 30% of all immigrants were under the age of 25 (CIC 2014). Such newcomers face a kind of double jeopardy: being new and being young. Until now, most studies of young newcomers have tended to focus on their needs and challenges in the areas of mental health, education, and employment. Furthermore, they also treat immigrant and refugee youth as a group without considering how membership in a particular ethnic community affects settlement trajectories. However, little is known about the challenges faced by young immigrants when accessing social services. Anecdotally, it is understood that those from small and relatively marginalized ethnic communities do not have access to formal support within their own community and have to seek help from mainstream organizations. However, these experiences have not been empirically documented in the literature. To fill this knowledge gap, we conducted an exploratory study of the experiences of young people living in Metro Vancouver who had come to Canada from Africa.[1] The aim was to address the question: What are the main barriers to accessing formal support services for African young people?

We chose this group of young people because the African community is relatively small compared to other immigrant groups, making up only 1% of the Metro Vancouver population. According to the 2006 Census, 27,260 people claimed African origin (Statistics Canada 2007a) and 20,670 identified as "Black" (Statistics Canada 2007b). Our focus on young African newcomers also arises out of one author's long-standing involvement with various African communities in Metro Vancouver. During that time it has become clear that despite there being a wealth of experiential knowledge of the challenges that such young people face, unless their perspectives are made the focus of formal inquiry, there is little prospect of policy change. Given that this was an exploratory study, our primary goal in this paper is to fill the holes in our empirical knowledge by reporting our key findings and their policy implications.

## Conceptual Framework: Gaps and Bridges

To guide our analysis, we use a conceptual framework of "gaps" and "bridges." By gaps we mean chasms or cracks between, on the one hand, young immigrants and refugees and their needs and, on the other, services available through formal support services. Gaps inhibit successful integration by maintaining a separation of youth

from mainstream society. In contrast, bridges create a continuum of services that offer a stable pathway for youth and connect them with services that promote their integration into mainstream society. The title of this article focuses awareness on existing gaps and suggests that greater attention is needed to fill or bridge the gaps we identify. Our findings suggest that in their attempts to access formal support networks, young African newcomers encounter more gaps than bridges. Before turning to our findings, we provide an introductory overview of some of the settlement challenges that young African newcomers face and the services available to help them meet those challenges.

### *Challenges faced by young African immigrants and refugees*

The needs of young newcomers are complex and interconnected, as are the barriers that hamper their ability to settle and successfully integrate into Canadian society. Schooling is a major challenge for many. Due to the placement of pupils in grades by age rather than ability, many are misplaced in grades too high or low for them (Wilkinson, Yan, Tsang, Sin and Lauer 2013). For older newcomers, entering the job market presents another set of difficulties. Compared to their Canadian-born counterparts, young newcomers are at a disadvantage in the labour market due to their lack of social capital (Lauer, Wilkinson, Yan, Sin and Tsang 2012) and the systemic discrimination they encounter (Oreopoulos 2009). Young refugees suffer particularly high rates of underemployment, unemployment, and poverty (Gunderson, D'Silva and Odo 2012). Most immigrants to Canada belong to a visible minority group, which is also linked to marginalized social status (n.k. 1999). At the same time, young newcomers must also rebuild their peer network – a critical step in identity formation. Jacquet et al. (2008) draw attention to the difficulty of developing a strong sense of identity when one's familiar home, family structure, and community networks and institutions have been lost. Persistent anti-Black racism and discrimination from peers, authority figures, the media, and the general population also threaten the self-esteem of many African newcomers (Kumsa, Ng, Chambon, Maiter and Yan 2013; Masinda and Ngene-Kambere 2008). Facing these different challenges, the literature indicates significant concern for mental health issues among this group (see, for example, the *New Canadian Children and Youth Study*[2]). Many of these challenges are not specific to African youth; however, as we describe below, compared to youth from other communities, African youth have relatively weak support systems to help them navigate the challenges

### *What assistance is available? A brief review of the literature on young people accessing services*

The double jeopardy imposed by being both young and new to a country defines the

challenges faced by youthful immigrants. Being young, they are in transition from adolescence to adulthood. This is one of the most stormy periods of life even in the best of circumstances. Being new, they are in transition from a familiar social and cultural milieu to a new society. In both situations, young people have to overcome a number of developmental and adjustment challenges. Very often, like their non-immigrant counterparts, young newcomers seek help from family and friends, but they may be undergoing their own adjustment challenges as well. Therefore, social service organizations play an important and necessary role. From an immigration perspective, these organizations are not only an important source of information but they can also serve as *bridges* to support young newcomers across troubled transitions. However, are these bridges reliable and dependable? According to the literature, young people face multifaceted needs and challenges, yet lack sufficient and reliable informal support networks. In other words, there seems to be a gap between the young people's needs and the assistance available to help them meet those needs. However, as the review underlines, little is known about the experiences of young newcomers accessing social services.

### *Informal support: Family and social networks*

Family and friends are assumed to be the key source of support to help young newcomers cope with settlement challenges. However, for many newcomer families, this assumption can be problematic. It has been found that migrating to a new cultural environment places enormous strain on intergenerational relationships as parents and young people confront new parenting styles, dating expectations, and familial relationships. This strain may discourage young people from seeking help from their parents (Houle 2011; Kilbride, Anisef, Baichman-Anisef and Khattar 2004). Moreover, parents who are themselves looking for work cannot assist children with finding employment, and those who are unfamiliar with the education system cannot effectively advocate for their children or assist them with homework. The smaller and more marginalised the community in question, the greater these challenges will be. In fact, African Canadians experience relatively high levels of un- and under-employment (Block and Galabuzi 2011). Additionally, many newcomer parents lack the appropriate social and cultural resources to support their young people (Yan, Lauer and Chan 2012). Instead of supporting their children to learn English, many parents lack English skills and may even rely on their children to translate for them. It is not uncommon in health and social service settings to find young newcomers interpreting for their parents (Hynie, Guruge and Shakya, in press). Lacking effective informal support systems, the most vulnerable youth must rely on social service providing organizations to bridge the gap.

### *Formal support: Mainstream vs. small ethnic organisations*

When young newcomers turn to formal support systems, they may prefer to seek assistance from organizations based in their own ethnic community because of cultural and linguistic proximity. However, the range of services available is determined in large part by the size of their community. Relative to other immigrant groups in Metro Vancouver, African-Canadian communities are small. Accordingly, while newcomers may receive help through their ethnic community networks, those offering such assistance are often in precarious situations themselves (Francis and Hiebert 2014). Young newcomers from small and marginalized communities that lack formal organizational capacity have extremely limited choices; apart from a handful of informal voluntary groups, there are no African-centered organizations providing services to members of those communities, creating a gap in the provision of culturally appropriate service provision. The small size of the population from sub-Saharan Africa and the lack of residential concentration creates an additional impediment to stronger collective organization in Metro Vancouver. As Creese (2011) suggests, in a diverse multicultural city, size matters for the ability to get concerns recognized and voices heard. For example, while members of larger ethnocultural communities are visibly involved in local, provincial, and national politics, this is not the case for African-Canadians. Creese (2011) found that support for creating a pan-African organization revolved around providing a stronger community voice to press for specific government-funded services and programs for African immigrants. Moreover, African ethno-specific organizations focus more on maintaining links with the home country than on offering support to people of African origin living in Metro Vancouver (Creese 2011). As a result, mainstream service organizations, which have the largest share of public funding, have become the major, if not the only, source of formal support for African youth.

However, as reflected in the literature, there are many shortfalls in the provision of services for young immigrants and refugees. Coordination among service providers is partial or nonexistent; available information is often incomplete or held in inaccessible locations; resources are unevenly distributed; and programs targeted to young newcomers are scarce, even as the number and needs of such families are increasing (Minichiello 2001; Morland, Duncan, Hoebing, Kirsehke and Sehmidt 2005; Shields, Rahi and Scholtz 2006). Large service-providing organizations are also challenged by the current funding model. Project-based and non-renewable funding means that much organizational time and resources are allocated to seeking and writing grant applications (Chuang 2009; Francis 2010). Meanwhile, financial constraints within families can also hamper their ability to afford program or transportation costs (Kunz and Hanvey 2000).

Additionally, when young newcomers access services provided by mainstream service organizations, they run into a cultural challenge in that most large organiza-

tions do not utilize culturally responsive tools to assess or address the needs of recently arrived youth, particularly refugees. Thus, instead of helping young people deal with their traumatic migration experiences, educational challenges, and so forth, they employ a one-size-fits-all delivery model that does not take into account different needs (Shields et al. 2006). Too often young newcomers find themselves participating in mainstream youth programs that are not adapted to their particular needs and concerns (Khadka, Yan, McGaw and Aube 2011; Ngo 2009). Many of Creese's (2011) participants perceived the lack of African-provided settlement services as significantly impeding integration. As we found in this study, even mainstream or multicultural organizations that apply a modified cultural approach may fail to attract and/or retain African youth, given their unique needs and concerns.

Furthermore, the approach employed by many youth service organizations is embedded in certain cultural or ideological frameworks that may not fit well with young newcomers' own understanding of who they are and what they need. Two observations from Australia are particularly insightful in understanding this misfit. Against the prevalent corporate liberalism of the social service system, Westoby and Ingamells (2007) find that even organizations that adopt a rights-based approach to youth work often ignore individual experiences in ways that are hurtful to participants. Couch (2007) points out that mainstream youth serving organizations tend to see young newcomers, particularly those from refugee backgrounds, as dependent and incompetent outsiders and do little to encourage their participation. Lacking bridging services to connect them smoothly and securely with the Canadian mainstream, some African young people fall through the cracks.

In summary, the literature indicates gaps in service provision that are detrimental to the settlement and integration of young newcomers struggling to make key developmental and integration transitions. However, the literature has not captured the actual lived experience of young newcomers when accessing social services. The findings we report below go some way toward addressing this knowledge lacunae.

## Methodology

The data for this study were collected in several stages. Approval for the study was first obtained from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board of the authors' affiliated institution. In the first stage, we interviewed twenty key informants, all of whom were front line service providers working with African immigrant and refugee youth. They were recruited through the authors' personal networks and referrals by other participants, and represent a range of mainstream service providers, multicultural immigrant service agencies, and ethno-specific or community-based organizations. Most of them were themselves also once newcomers to Canada from Africa and a

few were also young people, or parents with young family members at home. They are therefore uniquely positioned to speak from the dually informed perspective of both professional service providers, and also immigrants and service users of African origin. The semi-structured individual interviews were intended to achieve two purposes: a) to learn about the programs offered, inquire about the level and nature of participation of African youth, and identify challenges and best practices in terms of recruitment and retention; and b) to seek stakeholders' advice on the design of the interviews for young people and parents.

In the second phase, based on the information gathered in the first set of interviews, we conducted thirteen focus groups with forty young people (aged 13-29) and twelve parents in order to identify challenges and gaps between their needs and the services offered. We had held individual interviews with busy service providing professionals who we met during their working day in order to most effectively accommodate their schedules. However, we chose focus groups for interviewing youth and parents based on advice we received from service providers and in the hope that marginalised individuals would feel more comfortable sharing their experiences in a group with others who had had similar experiences, rather than in individual interviews where a young person is alone in a room with an unfamiliar adult interviewer (Morgan 1997). To further mediate the individual focus, we provided snacks and drinks, where were greatly appreciated. During the interviews, we asked about the challenges they faced, any assistance they received from formal or informal support networks, gaps in services and supports, and recommendations to improve service provision. The young people came from 18 different countries, although a quarter (N=10) came from Congo. For details of their demographic profile, please refer to Table 1. Most of the parents came from three countries (Congo, Burundi, and Nigeria); Table 2 provides detailed information on their backgrounds. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique incorporating multiple points of entry including youth groups, settlement workers, immigrant service agencies, and recommendations by other interviewees, as well as networks developed by the researchers as a result of several years of community involvement. The focus groups were conducted in English with some informal interpretation into French, Arabic, and various African languages. All the interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Informed by the long interview tradition (McCracken 1988), data were first coded manually into meaningful pieces and then were organized according to emerging themes relevant to the research question.

In the final phase, the preliminary findings from the interviews and focus groups were presented at a Community Forum attended by eighteen people who were interviewed in the first two phases. The objective of the forum was to use a dialogical process to collectively confirm the findings and suggest policy and program

**TABLE 1.** Young People's Demographic Information

| | Youth (n=40) | Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 13-19 years | 22 | 55% |
| | 20-30 years | 18 | 45% |
| Immigration status on arrival to Canada | Refugee (any class) | 25 | 63% |
| | Other | 4 | 10% |
| | No data | 11 | 27% |
| Language spoken on arrival to Canada | English | 5 | 12% |
| | French | 23 | 58% |
| | Other | 12 | 30% |
| | Total EAL | 35 | 88% |
| Length of time in Canada | Less than 1 year | 9 | 23% |
| | 1-3 years | 23 | 57% |
| | More than 3 years | 8 | 20% |

**TABLE 2.** Parents' Demographic Information

| | Parents (n=12) | Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Length of time in Canada | Less than 1 year | 1 | 8% |
| | 1-3 years | 11 | 92% |
| Immigration status on arrival to Canada | GAR | 12 | 100% |
| Languages spoken on arrival to Canada | English | 0 | 0% |
| | French | 6 | 50% |
| | Other | 6 | 50% |
| | Total EAL | 12 | 100% |

recommendations to enhance the capabilities of different organizations to meet the needs of young African immigrants and refugees. The study findings were written up in a final report which was distributed widely to social service organizations and research participants in print or electronic form.

An important limitation of our research method is that the young people included in the study were already connected at least to some extent with service organizations. The most marginalized and isolated young people do not benefit from these connections, as those experiencing extreme challenges may lack the abil-

ity or knowledge to approach an agency for assistance. Conversely, newcomers who are experiencing a relatively straightforward settlement process are unlikely to seek help from a settlement organization. Therefore, our findings may not be generalized to the situation of all young African newcomers, but we are confident that they can help us to understand the experience of those who access social services.

## Findings: Gaps In Information, Outreach, Trust, and Among Helping Agencies

During the interviews, people who work with young newcomers emphasized their eagerness to ease young people's settlement process but acknowledged that important barriers remain for some to access and participate in programs designed with the best intentions to facilitate their integration. In turn, African youth and parents expressed a sense of disconnection from, and an overall lack of trust in, the organizations that are supposed to help them. Our participants identified critical gaps in information provision, outreach, trust, and among helping agencies, which we describe below.

### *Information gaps*

Being new, it is difficult for many young people and their parents to know where to find assistance. Our young participants drew attention to the need for better information to help youth make appropriate choices about sexual health, nutrition, drugs, and other aspects of adolescent life in the Canadian context, since their connections with elders and family members who would have advised them at home about such things have been lost. When they sought help in Canada, our respondents found themselves bewildered by a labyrinth of information with no map to point the way. While parents and settlement service workers agreed that there are not enough services specifically designed for African families, a large number of more general youth and family programs are available from a wide range of mainstream service agencies. However, young people and their parents explained that they may not know about such programs or how to access them. These information gaps are exacerbated by language difficulties and lack of computer proficiency. Alternatively, families may know of a service, but lack information about exactly what goes on there, what support is available, and why they might be useful. Some young people who had appealed to Canadian-born acquaintances for help found that people born in Canada do not understand the immigrant experience or are also unaware of available services, while newcomers may also lack accurate information. Thus, although community networks are important, they may also be mis- or uninformed. Some interviewees had searched for information online, but the web can be baffling, especially for new users, and the amount of information available overwhelming.

As a result, most young African newcomers proceeded by trial and error. Camille (age 17, Congo) emphasized that "there are just so many things and programs that it's hard to know which one is what when you first arrive; you don't know which thing you should focus on, so you get confused …. Another thing is trust, because when you are new, you don't really trust people so you are afraid to ask." Michael (age 16, Sierra Leone) added that "[service providing organizations] should have somebody to help young people with good advice because you just have no idea where to go, where to start, and you can waste so much time!"

During the focus groups, we showed youth and parents a large collection of flyers collected from various agencies advertising different youth programs and facilities around Metro Vancouver. Everybody found these extremely helpful. Several young people elaborated on this point:

> Annie (age 23, Congo): ...most people don't know so many things! Or maybe they do get some information, but it's when they first arrive and they don't understand. They just tell you, "Go home and read it. If you have questions, call me."

> Zakaria (age 29, Guinea): [Service providers] really have to work to get youth into these programs and let them know about them …. That's better than just walking on the street until you see a black guy: "Hey, are you from Africa? Can you help me?"

Parents asserted that they also need more information. Omar (father, Burundi) explained that "the reason African youth do not attend programs is because we parents don't know anything about it—all they tell us is that there is the YMCA, but we don't know what it is or what they have there. We don't know what is important." Adam (father, Congo) made a similar point: "There's another culture here, it's basically a different world – everything is the opposite! … So parents need information: where we are, how to live with kids here, what should you do with your kids, what can they do, what are they free to do, that nothing is going to happen to them. Parents have to be informed!"

### *Gaps in outreach*

A major challenge is to connect young people who do not know how to access programs with center-based social service programming that assumes people will go and seek help. Many people of African origin, especially those from rural areas or who have spent several years in a refugee camp, are unused to visiting offices to ask for help, and are often intimidated by the process. There is a gap between the expectations of agency employees and the reality that youth do not tend to seek out services. For example, Thomas, a settlement worker, explained that young Africans "don't know what's out there and they won't think to look for any programs—why would

they? In their society it wasn't like that, so they just sit at home, not doing anything, or they join the wrong group." Aimé, a francophone settlement worker, observed that "this is a great country with lots of opportunities, but youth don't know how to access them, so they need more information about how to take advantage of all these resources. The government has set up a lot of services, but it's your responsibility to find out about them and use them, the program will not come to you."

The issue of information provision is in part an aspect of the distance between young people and agencies, which stems from many agencies' lack of connection to, or knowledge of, African communities, manifested as a gap in outreach capability. The following comments by Lise and Tamara are representative of those made by youth workers employed in large mainstream organizations. Tamara explained that "we haven't outreached to the African community and to be honest, I don't know who to outreach to, that's another reason I was interested in talking to you." Lise offered, "we really want to be able to reach out to the African community… and I'm at a loss how to do that."

Participants in this study were unanimous that outreach to African youth and families requires meeting people in person to explain things in a comfortable environment where trust can develop. The following responses to the question of how organizations should let African families know about available resources were typical:

> Adam (father, Congo): They should do what you are doing right now: you are in my house and I am explaining my problems to you – it's better…. At least it's somebody who can talk to you and encourage you…
>
> Omar (father, Burundi): To let people know about these programs they have to organise community workshops in each community, because not all immigrants have email, they might not even have a phone connection …. This would help the parents become familiar with those organizations and then you will see how useful those workshops can be.

These comments underscore the need for more personal connections in order to bridge the gap between African young people and their families with needed resources.

### *Gaps between needs and offerings*

Connecting African young people to programs also requires social service organizations to be more welcoming in terms of program flexibility, development of personal relationships based on trust, and provision of information in a comfortable environment that young people can relate to. However, there is a gap between the types of services African young people say they need, and those that are offered. The youth in our study explained that they often felt uncomfortable or shy in mainstream organizations where, in the words of Marcel (age 20, Rwanda), they "don't know the rules" and there is nothing familiar to which they can relate. For example, most organiza-

tions do not have people who speak African youths' mother tongues, so those who do not speak English fear being isolated. Adam (father, Congo) pointed out that

> [one reason] youth do not attend programs is they think they won't be able to communicate with the other children … if [organizations] could just put some mother tongues there as a bridge before you go to English, that would help them to be integrated. It doesn't have to be a program in Swahili, but just put some people who speak those languages so when [the youth] go there they will find somebody who speaks their language so they will be encouraged … and slowly, slowly they will get connected to the other children.

Many young people also said they do not seek out services because they feel out of place. For example, if there are no other immigrants in the program, they worry that their accent or level of literacy will be ridiculed and that their experiences will be misunderstood. Emilie (age 14, Burundi) explained that

> youth don't take part in existing programs because sometimes we don't really feel that we belong. According to how people may be looking at you or what they are thinking, you have this feeling that maybe they don't want you there, but they don't tell you that—you have to figure it out for yourself. After that experience, you don't want to go to another one, you just leave that one. That happens to lots of people!

In contrast, Joy (age 15, Nigeria) described the situation at an African youth group: "The people there are all African – meeting with them feels like home…it's so comfortable…I have the feeling all the time that I can just say whatever I want and nobody says, 'What are you talking about?' or gets scared or laughs."

The young people in this study also noted that some of the programs they had attended were not run by other young people but by adults who tended to "preach" to the attendees rather than providing real information about how to advance. Camille (age 17, Congo) commented: "Some people think they're helping but they're not…I think because it's coming from older people, they just want to tell you what to do and what not to do. In a group for youth, it wouldn't be telling each other what to do, but more just talking about it." Young people also need to see that the program meets their needs or they may become disillusioned with formal service altogether, further increasing the gap between agencies and African youth. In this context, Annie (age 23, Congo) stated, "I don't like going to offices, offices…because too many appointments, come here, go there, it's just pointless, I've tried that."

Furthermore, young people need to see themselves represented in the program literature. After viewing a large collection of flyers without a single representation of a black person, Alma (age 15, Burundi) stated, "I would be like, 'there are no black people there,' and it would even make me not want to go, since I would be the only black person. It's just awkward." Kissa, a settlement worker who came to Canada from Africa

as a young person several years ago, also pointed out that "participation of African youth in the existing mainstream programs is low because it's hard to relate to the program, or to whoever is conducting the program. For example, if I'm going to feel like I'm the only different one there, then that won't work. African youth have to see people who they can relate to, then they will feel more comfortable."

It is important to reassure and empower young Africans so that they feel able to take part in programs outside of their current comfort zone. As David, who runs a program for African youth, stressed,

> you have to make it so they are comfortable. Some people ask me, "How do you get so many youth to turn up to your club in the church basement?" And I tell them "Well, we sit down, we talk, they come and meet with their friends—sometimes we just talk about the game last night—and they like that because they feel welcomed: 'We are valued, people listen to us.'" That's how we do it: you bring them in slowly, and when they are here, you say, "Hey, this [program] could be good for you." If you are able to reach one person and they come and are happy, then tomorrow they will find another person to come, and the next day another, and so on. That works.

Unfortunately, that comfortable environment is often lacking. Patrice underlined the need for greater sensitivity and the need to avoid making assumptions about newcomers based on age, observing that

> some youth don't participate in activities because when they get there, the coordinator asks, "How old are you? Sixteen – okay, go there." They consider him as somebody who has already finished primary school, and when he is in the group, people laugh at him when he is asked a question and cannot answer. They go to programs! But because the coordinators don't arrange them there in a good way, it makes problems and discourages young people.

Connecting the need for cultural sensitivity to the issue of program design, Aimé, a settlement worker, commented that

> when you come from a different culture, the first thing you would like to have are some things and people who are familiar, who understand you, people who know your struggle. But it seems like sometimes African youth … don't find people who are sensitive to their culture…. I wouldn't say this problem is because of the people hired to run the program, but because the programs are often conceived by people who are not youth or even immigrants or refugees themselves, and they are not aware of the cultural parameters of the people who are in it. Sometimes they take programs that are not designed for refugee youth and just apply it to them, and that doesn't work either. The thing is that there is a lack of diversity among the decision makers.

Finally, many of our participants noted that even when a relationship between an agency and a young person has been successfully initiated, a number of other supports must be put in place to ensure ongoing participation. Once again, our research identified gaps between young people's needs and the expectations of service providers. For example, the heavy financial and familial responsibilities that result from living in a low-income household can result in uneven attendance and participation. As Kissa, a settlement worker, explained, "sometimes youth have to work…to support their families because many of them come from low-income families… so as soon as the kid is sixteen, they need to start working. I hear that a lot." In this context, Omotunde, who runs an African youth group at a multicultural service organization, also pointed out that "you can't have one person coming absolutely regularly for four months; that's not possible because they have so many other things in their lives."

### *Trust gaps*

Similarly, parents who took part in this study revealed that they feel left out of formal service networks; rather than a trusting connection, our research revealed a trust deficit or (our terms) a trust gap. Settlement workers agreed on the importance of outreach in developing trust with parents. As Omotunde explained "existing organizations should do more to relate to the families of these youth …. We have to create a stronger relationship between parents and organizations, and then we can also bridge the gap between the youth and the various organizations…. The aim is to try to take away fear, not only from the child, but also from the parents: to empower them." Naima, a settlement worker, emphasized the same point.

> You have to earn the trust of the parents! In the African community, if they don't trust you as the program coordinator or the youth worker or whatever, they just will not send their youth to you…. Parents have to understand that you don't want to use them for anything, you just want to help. Once they trust you, they will send their children, but you have to prove yourself…

Lacking these connections, parents in this study elaborated on their concerns that their children might pick up undesirable behaviours from facilitators or other young people, or be encouraged to forget their African roots. The following comments from different focus groups encapsulate these fears:

> Iman (mother, Burundi): The thing is that you send the kids to somebody who doesn't give them good behaviour … it's not enough to talk to [people running programs] on the phone … we have to meet them personally … we can't send our kids to a stranger.

> Eveline (mother, Congo): We've never seen anything like this before. That is why sometimes we are scared to send our kids: maybe they'll meet with other kids who have bad behaviour, and they will learn it quickly because children do learn quickly. If you send them for two weeks they will certainly come home with another behaviour, so we are scared of that…to send them somewhere every day is very dangerous in Canada.

The young people we spoke to were also aware of these issues. Constance (age 18, Congo) believed that "parents are worried about sending their kid to places because they think they'll learn bad manners. They'll say, 'You don't know who's there and we don't know them. What they teach you might not be what we teach you, so you shouldn't go.'"

### *Gaps among service organizations*

As with relationships between service organizations and families, those among different service organizations also need to be strengthened to bridge relational gaps among service providers. No single organization can meet all the needs of young newcomers. A number of parents and settlement workers suggested a link between the lack of effective information-sharing capacity among service providers and the lack of follow-up with families. For instance, the first point of contact in Canada for newcomer families who came to Canada as Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) was the BC reception centre (Welcome House). Some participants who arrived as GARs particularly wanted to draw our attention to the need for changes to the way outreach, program delivery, and referrals are coordinated. For example, Erasto (father, Congo) suggested that "Welcome House has to tell organizations when people arrive… We do have community organizations and agencies waiting to help people; the problem is they don't know where the people are." Conversely, Adam (father, Congo) felt that "when immigrants come to Canada, those organizations that are there to help should go straight to Welcome House to let them know about their programs… I think when we arrive, only one organization knows about us, but they can't provide everything that all newcomers need from the start."

Naima, who works for a small multicultural service provider, also reflected on the ways that poor information-sharing among agencies results in service gaps for users. She reflected that

> there are services in the community, but nobody calls us or says, "We have these twenty-five people from Africa, they require these services, could you please help them?" … That is why by the time the youth come to me they are in so much trouble – because it took them a while to find me. Yet I could have prevented the problem in the first place if I had known what was going on.

In this context, most settlement workers also mentioned concerns about tensions

around referrals, which some related to short-term funding systems that assume a sharp separation between "community" and "settlement" services, prevent long-term planning, discourage workers from making a significant investment in their project, and disrupt continuity of services for vulnerable people who are already struggling to develop trusting relationships. As John underlined, "one question revolves around the role of a multicultural service organization versus an ethno-specific organization – there is ongoing tension…. Rightly or wrongly, we are all being forced into this competitive Request for Proposals process." As a result, small community-based organizations, particularly in smaller ethnic communities, that provide vital services to vulnerable people may not receive any public funding at all. For instance, Senwe, a Settlement Worker in schools, pointed out that "the most vulnerable communities are those that have few programs for themselves: the African and Afghan communities."

Representatives of large mainstream organizations that offer programs for immigrant youth also complained about the lack of funding that prevents them from helping as they would like. Nancy, who runs the youth program at a well-established multicultural immigrant service agency, voiced a common concern. "There's a long waiting list, I've turned a lot of people away…. In fact, right now it's an unfunded program: I'm looking for funding at the moment, and it's pretty dire. I don't have any more hours so I have to do it all off the corner of my desk." Kissa also works for a large multicultural service provider; she explained that "we would really like to expand the program but it's a question of funding … the need is definitely there."

A related complaint concerned funders' focus on outputs rather than outcomes. In other words, many settlement workers feel that one reason some programs are not as successful as they could be is that funders are overly concerned with the lowest unit cost in terms of outputs as predicted in the initial funding proposal. Instead, they argue that the focus should be on outcomes, or clients' real-life development within their communities over a longer period of time. Settlement service workers also repeatedly stressed the need for funding that takes a longer-term approach to settlement needs in order to achieve long-term results.

Ongoing funding shortfalls, coupled with a short-term planning mentality, are particularly detrimental to young newcomers. Susan coordinates a program for immigrant youth at a well-established multicultural service organization. She explained that

> it's really a challenge funding-wise because funders don't give money to create a space where people feel welcome – the money is for straight delivery – but it would be nice if there was some recognition of the value of programs that are simply available and where people can come to. What we need is not more programs but more workers: people who have the time to be with people and invite them to things, follow up with them, and get them involved in programs – somebody who has the time to be with people as people

> and develop groups based on interesting things. There has to be a continuum of support, and there have to be places to go and ways to develop starting from where people are.

Kissa made a similar point: "Programs need to be ongoing, not just project funding that ends suddenly, because when you build relationships, then you need ongoing funding." Pierre, who works for an organization that serves francophone immigrants, insisted that

> People need more time! After five years of trauma or time in a refugee camp or whatever, you need time to integrate – years. And that should happen within a program, something stable and consistent that can help you take things step by step, because before youth can apply their energies to positive things, they have to feel comfortable and confident. They have to understand what's going on around them…. A six month program is great, but there also need to be programs that are two years or whatever. And not constantly applying for funding.

Sadly, the very service components that these three workers described as lacking in their current work environment are precisely those that our young newcomers and their parents asked for; namely, time to reach out and just be with people, relationship development, and specific strategies to help young people feel comfortable and confident. In short, there exist significant gaps between the needs of young African immigrants and refugees and the supports provided through formal networks. In the following section, we outline some of the ways in which service providers could bridge the existing gaps in services, which pose barriers to the successful integration of young African immigrants and refugees.

## Discussion: Bridging The Gaps

As our metaphor suggests, social service organizations and their programs can serve as bridges for young newcomers to ensure a smooth transition to adulthood and integration into Canadian society. Where there is no bridge, there is a gap; gaps present barriers to integration because they prevent young people from joining mainstream society. We have learned from the participants in this study that there is no shortage of bridges out there. However, accessing them is not a straightforward process for African young people and their parents; newcomers and their parents find it hard to navigate through an unfamiliar landscape because they do not know where the bridges lead or which ones they can trust. To many young newcomers and their parents, these structures appear like shaky suspension bridges and they lack the trust and confidence to cross over. As a result, they fall into the gaps or are left suspended in mid-air, unable to make the transition they desire. Our participants men-

tioned many barriers that young newcomers and their parents need to overcome in order to access appropriate services, where they exist. A few barriers are particularly worth pointing out.

### *Lack of information and trust*

Center-based programming, by default, puts the burden on service users to identify suitable services from different organizations in the community. This poses an ongoing challenge for isolated newcomers and their parents who are unused to visiting offices with programming that assumes people will seek help. A trusting relationship is crucial when seeking help, yet it is often lacking. Being new and isolated, the young people and parents in our study had little collective trust in, or knowledge of, local service providers. These conditions generate a gap between the services available and the services young newcomers need or want. Bridging this gap requires holding community workshops, providing services in African mother tongues, forming connections with local African groups and individuals, and nurturing those relationships through the challenges posed by marginalisation. The lack of cultural understanding and sensitivity, alongside a lack of familiarity with many services (particularly those provided by mainstream organizations) further discourages young people and their parents from accessing the services they need.

### *Lack of ethno-specific organizations*

Many ethno-racial minority newcomers may find it more comfortable and trustworthy to access services provided by organizations in their own ethnic communities due to cultural and linguistic proximity. However, funding frameworks overwhelmingly favour large organizations that are mandated to provide services for everyone, or at least for all immigrants. The tiny ethno-specific organizations that support African newcomer communities receive no government funding and the reluctance of funding bodies to support them has particularly troubling implications for outreach. As a result, many ethno-racialized newcomers, like the participants in this study, have to seek help from the large mainstream organizations, which are in turn hindered from providing appropriate services by their own funding challenges. It is also worth noting that when there are resource shortfalls, it is often those who are already most marginalised who suffer the most. Bridging these gaps requires changes in funding structure at a policy level.

### *Limited capacity for outreach and relationship building*

The participants in this study unanimously reported that lack of effective outreach to African parents and young people inhibits the development of trust, with the result that some organizations struggle to attract or retain service users. However,

funding policy tends to focus on rigid outcomes based largely on individual service users' access of centre-based services. Staff in these organizations are not funded to develop outreach practices and to nurture long-term working relationships based on the kind of personal connection that these young people and their parents insist that they need to bridge the trust gap. Outreach is particularly important as the initial development of a personal connection with a worker could help African newcomers and parents feel more comfortable, so that in time they may become more willing to seek help and information from office-based staff. Better outreach and follow-up could also prevent crises, rather than seeking to intervene when it is already too late. However, without that personal component, many parents remain unaware of how to effectively access social services or obtain information, and therefore the gap remains. Lack of targeted information and understanding about how to access settlement services functions as a barrier to participation in integration programs. The overwhelming flood of information coupled with a lack of outreach results in the disconnection of young African newcomers and their parents from services, and their underrepresentation in programs that could help them settle.

### *Lack of appropriate services*

Several participants pointed out that there is a gap between the design of many youth programs and the needs of African families. The transitional challenges faced by the young people in our study are compounded by discrimination, a traumatic migration process, family loss and separation, lower-than-average family income, and in some cases, temporary residence status. It is the intersection of racism, immigration status, poverty, membership in a small and marginalized community, and social isolation that makes this group particularly vulnerable. Thus, a one-size-fits-all approach cannot address their concerns. Though a variety of agencies offer a number of programs for young people and their families, most are not tailored to the needs of young people from communities whose members are relatively isolated from the mainstream. Barriers may also stem from unrealistic expectations on the part of some service providers about African young people's rate of cultural adaptation, or because the young people themselves feel they are being treated unfairly based on their age, level of literacy, skin colour, country of origin, or other characteristic. Bridging these gaps requires incorporating greater flexibility into program design in order to accommodate young people's other commitments and also the hiring of a critical mass of service providers of African origin so that they are able to provide the services their communities need. Having one person of African origin in a mainstream organization is ineffective for particularly small and marginalized groups, because there is no broad effect on the way services are provided. Moreover, as feminists have repeatedly argued in the case of women, a lone representative of a marginalized group often does not have the con-

fidence or opportunity to speak up in meetings dominated by majority groups.

### *Poor coordination among service providers*

The findings from this study suggest that no single organization can meet all the needs of young newcomers. Thus, different providers have to work together to ensure that these concerns are addressed. Many of the parents and settlement workers we interviewed drew attention to the insufficient information-sharing capacity and poor lines of communication among service providers, pointing out that agencies need to cooperate more closely to ensure that newcomers are connected with a range of services and resources from the outset. The problem is that divisions or gaps between agencies ultimately result in people who need their services being left without access to sufficient resources to participate fully in Canadian life. Bridging these gaps requires collaboration. If organizations are to work together they also need the time and resources to get to know one another, build trust, and develop information-sharing capacity. However, the current funding model is largely based on a competitive framework that discourages genuine and systematic coordination between service providers.

### *Implications: Bridge reinforcements needed*

Based on the recommendations from the forum and our analysis of these findings, we put forward four suggestions that may help not only African young people, but also those from other marginalized and ethno-racialized communities, access service bridges comfortably and safely.

First, there is an urgent need to develop a proactive strategy that includes enhanced outreach and more personal connections with young newcomers and their parents upon arrival. This proactive strategy would be of particular benefit to members of small and marginalized groups who, due to their social exclusion, lack of social capital, and geographic dispersal throughout Metro Vancouver, lack the resources needed to fill the service gaps they identify. Developing greater outreach capacity by building bridges among African community groups and service professionals will involve service providers taking deliberate steps to form relationships with community groups and individuals and making efforts to maintain the relationships. Participants felt that it is ultimately the responsibility of the government to ensure that the needs of urban residents are met, and it is worth remembering that these young immigrants are future citizens.

Second, the experiences of the young people we spoke to underscore the need for culturally appropriate bridging programs aimed more specifically at young immigrants and refugees from particular ethnic backgrounds. These programs should bridge the period from the time of arrival to the point at which a young person is ready to enter mainstream programs. Ethno-specific, multicultural, and main-

stream programs all play important roles at various stages of settlement and integration and, when properly coordinated, can accommodate varying rates of progress. Developing the ethno-specific component of the service continuum would create opportunities for people from smaller communities to gain the confidence to take a more active part in mainstream programming. This must involve the provision of services in African mother tongues, hiring a critical mass of African support workers and holding community workshops in local ethnic, national, and linguistic communities.

Third, more long-term and ongoing programs are needed in addition to short-term projects, because integration is a lengthy process. When combined with the bridging initiatives described above, long-term and ongoing programming will create a culturally sensitive continuum of care, which is currently lacking for small groups, including Africans, but already exists for larger and more established groups. The provision of incremental assistance for people at every point in the settlement and integration process will enable them to remain connected to networks and resources and ensure that vulnerable or sensitive young people are given the opportunity to adapt and find their feet at their own pace. Ongoing programs can also increase accessibility by accommodating changes in people's lives, given that at times they may have to stop attending until their situation stabilizes again.

Finally, better coordination and information sharing among service providers is needed. This will lead to the development of a comprehensive and holistic system to meet the various needs of young newcomers. To facilitate better coordination among diverse organizations, funders must also provide resources earmarked for co-operative organization, analysis, and data distribution. It is also necessary to create and strengthen community and professional relationships that will facilitate the most effective and efficient use of relevant data. The aim of youth programs is to improve the lives of young people, so existing tensions around referrals must be overcome if the needs of young Africans and their families are to be adequately met. Just as bridges must be built between young people and helping agencies, service providers also need bridges to connect them with each other. Increased collaboration requires that funding mechanisms specifically acknowledge the time and intellectual commitment required of organizations when they seek to develop relationships with each other.

## Conclusion

Difficulties in transitioning processes are not uncommon and young African newcomers need support to negotiate these transitions. Lacking informal support, they need Canadian society as a whole to provide bridging support to them through pub-

licly funded social service organizations. We may not be short of these organizations and services, although there are many gaps among them. Moreover, they are like shaky and unfamiliar suspension bridges that appear weak and untrustworthy, and therefore fail to gain the confidence of young newcomers. When they step onto the bridges, young people find themselves swaying in mid-air, not knowing where to put their feet to avoid the gaps. Our findings also indicate that policies and services have not kept pace with the growing and increasingly diverse needs and, accordingly, young newcomers are not accessing them. As a result, there are gaps between young people and the resources they need to thrive. Rather than positive integration, many African young people are experiencing negative forms of integration, or a social exclusion that in turn will jeopardize their successful transition to adulthood. There is an urgent need for government and social services organizations to work together to bridge the gaps and improve conditions for young newcomers who constitute a major force to energize the aging Canadian population. It is worth investing in young people, particularly those from smaller ethnic communities, to create a more just and prosperous society. In closing, we endorse youth worker Denzel's powerful and provocative question, "It's an investment: if you want [African youth] in the country, why would you want them to come in and fail?"

## Notes

1. We understand that Africa is a large continent, home to many national, ethnic, and linguistic groups. In addition to their different histories and personalities, the young people we spoke to were also differentiated by class, age, gender, language, culture, religion, and legal status. Despite this diversity, we treat people from Africa as a coherent group for the purposes of this study; first, because the African-Canadian population in Metro Vancouver is relatively small and, second, because, by their own account, newcomers from Africa share many socioeconomic characteristics and challenges. In *The new African diaspora in Vancouver: Migration, exclusion and belonging,* Creese confirms the construction of a unique pan-African diasporic identity that shapes emerging notions of community and struggles over exclusion and belonging in Metro Vancouver, resulting in a "Black sub-Saharan African immigrant experience" (2011, 24). Moreover, as we show in this paper, the young people themselves, their parents, and settlement workers all offered compelling reasons why there should be programs aimed specifically at African youths.

2. The New Canadian Children and Youth Study (NCCYS) is a national longitudinal study of the physical health and mental health of approximately 4,000 children, youth and their families from sixteen different ethnocultural communities across Canada. The study has resulted in numerous publications and reports which are available at www.nccys.com.

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